AUTONOMY AND STAGNATION

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AN ECONOMIC COMMENTARY ON ECCLESIASTES

GARY NORTH

POINT FIVE PRESS
Dallas, Georgia

Autonomy and Stagnation: An Economic Commentary on Ecclesiastes

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Published by
Point Five Press
P.O. Box 2778
Dallas, Georgia 30132

Typesetting by Kyle Shepherd

This book is dedicated to

Herbert Schlossberg

Whose Idols for Destruction *set*
the standard for social analysis

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Introduction	1
1	Cyclical History vs. Progress (Eccl. 1:2–7)	7
2	Imputation and Value (Eccl. 2:11)	13
3	The Sovereignty of Death (Eccl. 2:15–17)	16
4	Uncertain Inheritance (Eccl. 2:18–21)	19
5	Transition to Biblical Covenantalism (Eccl. 2:22–24)	26
6	Predictable Ethical Sanctions (Eccl. 2:26)	29
7	Godly Time and Beastly Time (Eccl. 3:1)	32
8	The Joy of Consuming (Eccl. 3:10–13)	37
9	Oppression and the Oppressed (Eccl. 4:1)	42
10	Envy Undermines Success (Eccl. 4:4)	46
11	Sloth and Starvation (Eccl. 4:5)	49
12	Peace and Quiet (Eccl. 4:6)	52
13	Mindless Accumulation (Eccl. 4:8)	55
14	The Division of Labor (Eccl. 4:9–12)	59
15	Wisdom and Social Mobility (Eccl. 4:13–14)	63
16	Vows and Promises (Eccl. 5:4–5)	66
17	Delayed Sanctions (Eccl. 5:8)	70
18	Purposeful Nature (Eccl. 5:9)	74
19	Insatiable Discontent (Eccl. 5:10–16)	77
20	In Praise of Consumption (Eccl. 5:18–20)	85
21	When a Stranger Inherits (Eccl. 6:1–2)	87
22	Autonomy vs. Economic Growth (Eccl. 6:7–12)	92
23	Autonomy and Sorrow (Eccl. 7:1–4)	96
24	Oppression and Bribery (Eccl. 7:7)	101
25	Faith in Progress (Eccl. 7:8–10)	104
26	Wisdom and Kingdom (Eccl. 7:11–12)	108
27	Lukewarm Ethics (Eccl. 7:15–17)	112
28	Constant Improvement (Eccl. 7:29)	116

29 The Uncertainty of Timing (Eccl. 8:6–7) 120
30 Time Runs Out (Eccl. 8:10–13) 124
31 Eat, Drink, and Be Merry (Eccl. 8:14–15) 128
32 Ignorance is Not Bliss (Eccl. 8:16–17) 131
33 Dead Lions and Economic Stagnation (Eccl. 9:2–4) 135
34 With All Your Strength (Eccl. 9:7–10) 139
35 The Secondary Soereignty of Chance (Eccl. 9:10–11) 144
36 Money and Power Religion (Eccl. 9:14–16) 147
37 Hierarchy and Judgment (Eccl. 10:5–7) 150
38 Justifying Paralysis (Eccl. 10:8–9) 155
39 Wasted Efforts (Eccl. 10:15) 160
40 The Costs of Sloth (Eccl. 10:18) 162
41 Money: The Most Marketable Commodity (Eccl. 10:19) . . 166
42 Charity Pays Dividends (Eccl. 11:1–2) 169
43 Inputs and Outputs (Eccl. 11:3–6) 172
44 The Vanity of Death (Eccl. 12:5–8) 177
45 The Answer is Theonomy (Eccl. 12:13–14) 180

Conclusion 187

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Ecclesiastes is a series of pithy observations on the human condition. No other book in the Bible, and surely no other book in ancient literature, matches it for the profoundness of its insights in so short a document.

The main theme of the book is the hopelessness of the philosophy of autonomy. The key word is *vanity*. The book conveys this theme by means of two connected sub-themes: inheritance[1] and death.[2]

A. A Major Problem

There is a major problem with this book. It offers profound insights that are inconsistent with each other. Some of them are screamingly, defiantly inconsistent. Let me provide three examples.

On the benefits of labor:

> Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? (Eccl. 1:2–3)

> Behold that which I have seen: it is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him: for it is his portion (Eccl. 5:18).

On the superiority of wisdom:

> Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity. For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool. Therefore I hated life;

1. Chapters 2, 3, 4, 8, 13, 16, 21, 23, 25, 26, 30, 34, 45.
2. Chapters 2, 3, 4, 7, 21, 22, 23, 25, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 39, 44, 45.

> because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit (Eccl. 2:15–17).
>
> Wisdom strengtheneth the wise more than ten mighty men which are in the city (Eccl. 7:19).

On the benefits of riches:

> There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is common among men: A man to whom God hath given riches, wealth, and honour, so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it: this is vanity, and it is an evil disease (Eccl. 6:1–2).
>
> Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God (Eccl. 5:19).

Well, which is it? In each case, which is it? This trio of conflicting observations cannot all be correct. We must pick and choose. On what basis? By what standard?

Why must we pick and choose? Why not say this? "You have heard it said. . . . But I say unto you." Jesus did. The Preacher didn't.[3]

B. Goads and Goading

As you read the Book of Ecclesiastes, keep these words in mind: "The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd" (Eccl. 12:11). Obscure, aren't they? These words appear almost at the end of the book. Two verses later, the book concludes with these words:

> Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil (Eccl. 12:13–14).[4]

These words are not obscure. They are specific, explicit, and altogether humbling to the reader.

What are goads? There is only one other reference in the Bible to goads. "Yet they had a file for the mattocks, and for the coulters, and for the forks, and for the axes, and to sharpen the goads" (I Sam. 13:21). This, too, is obscure. There is a reference to an ox goad in

3. "Preacher" is an English identification of the Hebrew word, Qoheleth. It has no literal translation.

4. Chapter 45.

Judges, but the Hebrew word is different. "And after him was Shamgar the son of Anath, which slew of the Philistines six hundred men with an ox goad: and he also delivered Israel (Jud. 3:31). The article on "goad" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (1915) says this:

> The goad used by the Syrian farmer is usually a straight branch of oak or other strong wood from which the bark has been stripped, and which has at one end a pointed spike and at the other a flat chisel-shaped iron. The pointed end is to prod the oxen while plowing. The flattened iron at the other end is to scrape off the earth which clogs the plowshare. The ancient goad was probably similar to this instrument. It could do villainous work in the hands of an experienced fighter (Judges 3:31).

So, we are not really sure what the goad of Ecclesiastes was. We do know how the word was used. It was a metaphor. It was a metaphor based on a device that may have been used as a cattle prod and also as a tool to scrape dirt off a plow in order to make the plow more efficient. If this was the goad that the Preacher had in mind, then it was tool for getting things moving forward.

C. Rival Covenantal Outlooks

The Preacher presents a series of observations and conclusions in this book. His arguments are brief and graphic. But exactly what is he getting at with his book? This question is at the heart of the expositor's problem. This is his challenge.

I have come to a conclusion. *The Book of Ecclesiastes is directed against the philosophy of human autonomy*. Its observations regarding the futility of life—life's all-encompassing vanity—are inescapable conclusions of the logic of human autonomy.

The Preacher also offers counter-observations. These observations are consistent with man's complete subordination to the law of God: theonomy (Eccl. 12:13–14). There is nothing more for him to say, and so he does not say it. (This is a very good rule for authors in every era.)

The supreme task of an expositor of the Book of Ecclesiastes is to identify the category of each of the observations and conclusions. There are two categories. One category is *autonomy*: man's self-law. The other category is *theonomy*: the law of God. The first category proclaims man's independence from God. The second category proclaims man's dependence on God.

Each view is marked by a covenant. All outlooks are. The biblical covenant establishes the framework for every covenant. This model is

as follows: (1) sovereignty, (2) authority, (3) law, (4) judgment, and (5) progress.[5] The biblical covenant proclaims the following.

Sovereignty. God alone is sovereign. He is the source of meaning in eternity and also in history.

Authority. The special revelation of God in history is authoritative. It represents God.

Law. God has revealed his law in the Bible.

Judgment. God imputes meaning to all things: what is worthwhile and what is not.

Progress. History is both linear and progressive. God grants inheritance to His people in history.

In contrast is the covenant of self-proclaimed autonomous man, as described by the Preacher.

Sovereignty. Death is sovereign. It consumes all things.

Authority. The mind of each man is authoritative for himself, but only for as long as he lives.

Law. All law is subject to flux.

Judgment. Men proclaim judgment, but death triumphs over life. Death imputes no meaning.

Cycles. History is cyclical. Progress is an illusion.

The Preacher highlights what he believes are the fundamental dividing lines between autonomy and theonomy. The main one is death as the final judge vs. God as the final judge. Death is impersonal. God is personal. Death does not impute meaning to the world. God does. Death does not distinguish performance in terms of ethical standards. God does.

Autonomous man does not accept the concept of an absolutely sovereign God who cannot be manipulated by man, only persuaded (Ex. 32:9–15). Such a God denies man's autonomy.

D. The Preacher's Methodology

The Preacher uses a combination of testimony and logic. He testifies to what he has seen. He has seen a great deal. He uses logic, not to

5. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1987] 1992). Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory*, 5th ed. (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, 2010).

develop the case for theonomy but rather to develop the case against autonomy. He uses a unique approach: following the logic of autonomy to its inescapable conclusions. He lets people see where a rival view of God and man leads: to despair.

Man is not sovereign, the Preacher reveals. Either death is sovereign or else the God of the Bible is sovereign. The Preacher argues throughout his presentation that these are the only two options: the sovereignty of death or the sovereignty of God. In his final words, he announces his conclusion: God is sovereign, not man and not death.

The crucial dividing point between the Preacher's two sets of observations is this: *imputation*.[6] The Preacher's use of imputation involves three steps: the assessment of life's meaning, the public declaration of this assessment, and the imposition of visible historical sanctions in terms of this assessment. Who wins? Who loses?

The Preacher never openly says that imputation is the central philosophical issue he is raising. He never says the following:

> There are only two possible sources of meaning: God and death. God and death are interpreted in radically different ways by the philosophy of autonomy and the philosophy of theonomy. Autonomy cannot escape the sovereignty of impersonal death. Theonomy proclaims the sovereignty of a personal God. The dividing line between autonomy and theonomy is the answer to this question: "Which factor is sovereign in history: God or death?"

The Preacher's discussion of imputation centers on this distinctly economic issue: *inheritance*. Inheritance is the supreme economic issue in the Book of Ecclesiastes, because the inescapable factor dividing autonomy from theonomy is death. The Preacher explores the implications of death for every person's life. He presents inconsistent conclusions, because he speaks as a one-man debate team.

The Preacher's methodology is to present the case against autonomous man by offering brief summaries of what he has personally observed about the way the world works. These observations conflict with each other. He recognizes that all facts are interpreted facts. Facts are neither autonomous nor self-evident. Van Til called these hypothetically autonomous facts "brute facts." He denied that brute facts can exist.

> Scripture teaches that every fact in the universe exists and operates by virtue of the plan of God. There are no brute facts for God. As to his own

6. Chapters 2, 3, 4.

> being, fact and interpretation are co-extensive. There are no hidden unexplored possibilities in God. And as to the universe, God's interpretation logically precedes the denotation and the connotation of all facts of which it consists.[7]

> Believer and non-believer have opposite philosophies of fact and opposite philosophies of law. They also have, behind both of these, opposite views of man. Corresponding to the idea of brute fact and impersonal law is the idea of the autonomous man. Corresponding to the idea of God-controlled fact and law is the idea of God-controlled man. The idea of creation out of nothing is not found either in Greek or in modern philosophy.[8]

Because all facts are interpreted facts, the Preacher presents fundamental aspects of the world as autonomous man sees them. Then he presents these same aspects of life as a covenant-keeper sees them. They do not see the world in the same way.

Conclusion

The book of Ecclesiastes confuses Christians. They do not understand that the bulk of this book is devoted to refuting foolishness in the name of foolishness. It is an attempt to draw out the consequences of foolishness from the presuppositions of foolishness. The author presents his case against autonomous man. He does so in the name of God, but this is not clear until the final chapter of the book. There, he affirms theonomy: the law (*nomos*) of God (*theos*).

The book has two fundamental themes: (1) autonomy vs. theonomy; (2) the sovereignty of death vs. the sovereignty of God.

7. Cornelius Van Til, *Christian-Theistic Evidences* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1978), p. 64.

8. Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977), p. 6.

1

CYCLICAL HISTORY VS. PROGRESS

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.

ECCLESIASTES 1:2–7

A. The Ancient World

The ancient world in every culture except Israel's affirmed cyclical history.[1] Men saw the cycles of nature, and they adopted cycles as the basis for understanding man's history and future.[2] In this passage, the Preacher speaks in the name of autonomous man.

The Preacher asks a question that thoughtful men throughout history have asked: "Of what profit is a man's labor?" As with other thoughtful men in history, he looks to the future as a way of verifying the worthiness of his labors. He says that one generation passes away, and another generation comes. The earth abides forever (v. 4).

1. Stanley Jaki, *Science and Creation: From Eternal Cycles to an Oscillating Universe* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1974), ch. 6.

2. The great cycle was astrology's Great Year: the 26,000-year cycle called the precession of the equinoxes. The zodiac slowly changes in relation to the sky. This comes from the inclined axis of the earth. The poles change their position. New stars become the north star. The ancients were well aware of this. See Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill: An Essay on Myth and the Frame of Time* (New York: Gambit, 1969).

The sun rises and sets. The wind goes toward the south; then it goes toward the north. It whirls around continually and returns again to its circuits (v. 6). Rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full (v. 7).

There are patterns in life, but these patterns do not seem to establish relevance. All things are full of labor, he says, but the eye is not satisfied with seeing, and the ear is not filled with hearing. The thing that has been is the thing which shall be, and that which is done is that which will be done. "There is no new thing under the sun" (v. 9).

This is a famous passage. It indicates that life is futile. Life comes and goes without progress. Things change, yet they do not change. In the famous phrase of the French, the more things change, the more they stay the same. There is no satisfaction. There is no conclusion to men's labors. There is no meaning to men's labors. There is no memory of former things, and neither will there be memory of things that are to come (v. 11).

This is the worldview known as cyclical history. There appears to be progress, but there is no progress. Everything that takes place today is essentially the same as everything that took place yesterday, and is not fundamentally different from everything that will take place tomorrow.

This outlook destroys the concept of progress. Without the concept of progress, men are tempted to despair about the meaning of their own existence. Thoughtful men worry that even their thoughtfulness is irrelevant. This worry is the essence of almost all of the Book of Ecclesiastes.

The effect of the concept of cyclical history, when widely accepted in a civilization, is to undermine science, technology, economic growth, and progress in general.[3] If the future is the same as the past, and the past cannot be distinguished from the present, then anything we do in the present is irrelevant. The present does not develop anything from the past, and it does not leave a legacy to the future. Man finds himself in a universe governed by meaninglessness. Whatever appears to be progress is an illusion.

B. The Preacher's Legacy

This is why the Preacher asks the question regarding the profit of his labor. If he cannot supervise how his legacy will be used, and if his legacy will be used in much the same way as any legacy is ever used, meaning that it is squandered, then what is the use of laboring hard

3. Jaki, *Science and Creation*.

for a lifetime in order to accumulate sufficient goods to constitute a legacy? One generation passes away, and another generation comes. The earth endures forever, but generations come and go. This means that legacies come and go.

Labor is hard work. It must be endured by most people, but this was not the case with the Preacher. He was in a position not to work. Thus, his labors were a liability. They did not gain him anything of long-term value. Nothing he could do would have any effect on the long term. Things come and go. But if things must be labored for and sacrificed for in order to come, then of what use is the labor? Why bother to sacrifice? It is all vanity.

"Vanity, vanity, all is vanity." This is a famous phrase from the book of Ecclesiastes. Everywhere the Preacher looks, he sees vanity. Success is an illusion. People are proud about what they own or what they have accomplished. Yet of what good is any of it? Things come and go. Everything that comes eventually goes. The earth abides forever, but the works of men do not. This is the worldview of most of the Book of Ecclesiastes. The Preacher examines numerous philosophies of life, and he finds them all to be vanity. They lead nowhere.

His conclusion is pessimistic. He has seen all the works that are done under the sun, and behold, they are all vanity and vexation of spirit (v. 14). *This is a counsel of despair*. He continues in his despair. He says that whatever is crooked cannot be made straight, and whatever is lacking cannot be numbered (v. 15). Nothing can be changed. But if nothing can be changed, then of what use is labor? It is vanity. It is futile. It is a gigantic waste of time.

He says that he gave his heart to know wisdom, and also to know madness and folly. It is all vexation of spirit (v. 17). If wisdom is equated with madness and folly, then wisdom is without value. Yet we know from the Book of Proverbs that wisdom is most valuable. "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding" (Prov. 4:7). The author of Ecclesiastes was in all likelihood the author of Proverbs.[4] Why are we told to get wisdom if wisdom is not fundamentally different from madness and folly? This makes no sense.

This is the point of the Book of Ecclesiastes. The philosophies of life which the Preacher summarizes are madness and folly. They are all vanity.

4. "The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel" (Prov. 1:1). "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (Eccl. 1:1).

What matters, he concludes in the final chapter, is to obey God's law. This is the correct conclusion. But men, especially intelligent men who think about the meaning of life, do not like this conclusion. They prefer their own economy. They want to make their own laws. They do not wish to subordinate themselves to the cosmic Lawgiver. So, they indulge in vanity. They seek meaning in a world that cannot provide meaning. They seek meaning as autonomous men in an autonomous universe. Neither they nor the universe are autonomous. Their search ends in vanity.

He says that he communed with his own heart. He says that he had inherited a great estate. He has gotten more wisdom than those who had been before him in Jerusalem. His heart had great experience with wisdom and knowledge (v. 16). He gave his heart to know wisdom and also to know madness and folly. He concludes that "in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (v. 18). Grief and wisdom are equated; so are sorrow and knowledge. Things which are widely believed to be good lead to things that are widely acknowledged to be bad.

It takes concentration and effort and leisure to develop wisdom, yet wisdom produces much grief. Why should any rational person continue the hard work of seeking and obtaining wisdom, when success in attaining wisdom leads to grief? Philosophers have been asking themselves this question for a long time. They have not come up with any agreed-upon answers.

C. Economic Progress

From an economic standpoint, the philosophy of time that is articulated in this passage undermines economic progress. Economic progress requires capital. Capital is formed by combining land and labor over time.[5] All three must be paid for: rent, wages, and interest. Why should people sacrifice land and labor over time if all that their efforts ever produce is vanity? Whenever people believe that this cause-and-effect system is universal—that hard work produces nothing of value—they cease to work hard. They eat, drink, and are merry rather than forfeit present value on behalf of future value.[6] Why forfeit the pleasures of the present for the sake of vanity in the future? If pleasure is vanity, and hard work is vanity, let us pursue

5. Murray N. Rothbard, *Man, Economy, and State: A Treatise on Economic Principles*, 2nd ed.(Auburn, Alabama: Mises Institute, [1962] 2009), ch. 7:4–5.

6. Chapter 31.

pleasure. Pleasure is fun. Pleasure is now. Get pleasure. Pleasure is the principal thing.

Throughout the Bible, but especially in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, we find a completely different view of history. Moses told the generation of the conquest that God blesses covenant-keeping and curses covenant-breaking. He told them that if they obeyed the laws of God, God would prosper them. There is no hint in either passage that poverty is a benefit.

Men legitimately strive in order to amass property. They are not to do this as if property were of any value in and of itself. Nothing is autonomous except God. Only He has value in Himself. Men are to amass property for the sake of God. Their administration of His assets is a moral and legal responsibility. So, *the view of history that the Preacher presents in the Book of Ecclesiastes is utterly pagan*. It is in opposition to the biblical worldview. The biblical worldview affirms the legitimacy of progress. It therefore assumes the legitimacy of economic growth.

There is a big difference between wealth and poverty. There is also a big difference between wisdom and folly. This difference increases over time. Covenant-keepers are supposed to extend the kingdom of God in history. Covenant-breakers are supposed to surrender their kingdom. The kingdom of God is not vanity. It must not be equated with the kingdom of Satan or the kingdom of man, which is the same kingdom.

If men were to accept the philosophy of life that is presented in this initial chapter, there would be no sustained economic progress. If there is no progress from the past into the present or from the present into the future, then all is meaningless. The author of the book does not accept this philosophy of life, as he shows in the final chapter. But he argues this philosophy in a straightforward way in this book. He shows that its conclusion is unpalatable: everything is vanity in its own way.

Conclusion

Because the book of Ecclesiastes is a sophisticated rejection of the philosophy governing the first chapter, covenant-keepers have had a view of time very different from the cyclical view presented here. The linear and progressive view of time that is taught by both Judaism and Christianity has stood as a challenge against the entire ancient world and its view of cyclical time.

The centrality of Christianity's view of the future on Christian social thought[7] is rarely mentioned in Christian circles, but it is sometimes perceived by humanists. They understand that the view of time presented in the Bible, which is not presented in this chapter, is a powerful incentive for self-sacrifice in the present on behalf of the future. It is a call to thrift. It is a call to future-orientation at the expense of present-orientation.

7. Gary North, *Millennialism and Social Theory* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990).

2

IMPUTATION AND VALUE

Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.

ECCLESIASTES 2:11

A. Compared to What?

In Ecclesiastes 1, the Preacher dismisses life as being filled with vanity. Everything that a person does is vanity. He offers a counsel of despair. He says that one thing follows another, but there is no progress, no meaning, and much vexation of spirit. He concludes the lesson by saying that he had given his heart to know wisdom, but in much wisdom there is much grief. He who increases his knowledge increases his sorrow (vv. 17–18).

In Ecclesiastes 2, he reports on his journey down a different track. He has pursued laughter and pleasure (vv. 1–2). But this also is vanity. He equates laughter and madness. He has pursued wine as well as wisdom (v. 3). He has pursued folly in order to see what is good for mankind (vv. 3, 12). In other words, he has explored the full range of human emotion and human experience, in order to make sense of it. His conclusion: it makes no sense.

By assessing what he has experienced, he renders judgment. He draws a conclusion. He has compared his experience with a standard. He does not tell us what this standard is. *This is the universal problem for self-proclaimed autonomous man. He has access to no self-validating, self-revealing standard*. How can anyone assess anything without a fixed standard? There is a story of a man who has just been told that

Einstein's theory of relativity teaches that space is curved. He retorts: "Compared to what?" This is the Preacher's problem. He concludes that everything is vanity. Compared to what?

B. The Futility of Accumulation

As part of his pursuit of experience, he built great works. He built houses. He planted vineyards (v. 4). He planted gardens and orchards (v. 5). He planted trees that bore many kinds of fruit. In other words, he invested for the future. He spent wealth on the creation of long-term capital goods. He sacrificed in the present in order to benefit in the future.

He also accumulated servants and maidens. He had a large enough household of servants so that children were born in his house. He had great possessions of cattle. He lived in the capital city of Jerusalem (v. 7), which was the most expensive real estate in the nation. This was where the center of population was, because it was where the temple was.

He accumulated silver and gold. He accumulated goods associated with kings. He brought in male and female singers. He experienced the delights of mankind, which included music (v. 8). He describes his condition: "So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me" (v. 9). He appeared to have the best of life. "And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labor: and this was my portion of all my labor" (v. 10).

He then looked at all that he had accumulated, and he concluded, once again, that it was all vanity and vexation of spirit. Conclusion: there is no profit under the sun (v. 11).

He continued to pursue wisdom, madness, and folly (v. 12). He despaired of the present because there is no progress in life. Everything that follows is simply a repetition of everything that has preceded (v. 12). This is his theme of cyclical history.[1] On the one hand, he concludes that wisdom is better than folly, in the same way as light is better than darkness (v. 13). The wise man can see, but the fool walks in darkness. On the other hand, one event happens to both the wise man and the fool (v. 14). *Death swallows up all of a person's legacy*. The Preacher will die, as surely as a fool dies. "For there is no remem-

1. Chapter 1.

brance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool" (v. 16). Then why is he any wiser than the fool? No good reason. Conclusion: it is all vanity. "Therefore I hated life; because the work that has wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit" (v. 17).

Conclusion

The Preacher explored the main avenues of autonomous human performance and enjoyment. Everything he tried on this basis was vanity. It meant nothing. He acted in terms of various theories of autonomous human achievement and meaning, and he found them all lacking. They are all swallowed up by death and uncertainty.

This is humanism. When men claim autonomy, they thereby abandon the foundations of meaning and value. Death is life's common denominator. It is impersonal. It undermines all meaning. *Without imputation by God, there is no meaningful imputation by man*.

This has the methodology of modern economics ever since the 1870s. It teaches that all economic value is imputed subjectively by individuals. But mortals cannot impute authoritatively and finally. *Man's imputation is vetoed by death*. It is also undermined by uncertainty about the future and therefore about the present.

3

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF DEATH

Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity. For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool. Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

ECCLESIASTES 2:15–17

A. In Defense of Autonomy

The Preacher speaks here on behalf of the philosophy of autonomy. His observations reflect the autonomous man's supreme stumbling block: the sovereignty of death. For autonomous man, death is the great equalizer. Death swallows all men: good and evil, wise and fool, rich and poor. Nothing is remembered about any of them. *Death undermines men's confidence*. The Preacher lays out the case against the philosophy of autonomy by articulating the concerns of someone who does not believe in the sovereignty of the God of the Bible.

A person capable of thinking carefully about the central issues of life has greater perception than a person who drifts through life. The former thinks of himself as wise. He is wise enough to perceive that wisdom in a world governed by death has no advantage over foolishness. *Death does not distinguish between wisdom and foolishness. Both are grist for its cosmic mill*. "Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity." "And how dieth the wise man? as the fool. Therefore I hated life; because the work that

is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit."

B. Life and Death

Life is the source of hope. Death overcomes this hope. Life does not overcome death. The Preacher insists that "one generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever" (Eccl. 1:4). Surely, this is an affirmation of life. It may seem so on first glance, but it is not. Every generation passes away. It dies off.[1] *The only way for life to overcome death is through inheritance*. The inheritance of each generation from the preceding one aids it in overcoming the effects of sin in history, thereby thwarting the effects of death. Each generation can leave a predictably positive legacy to the next generation. But the Preacher denies that there is any legitimate hope in this intergenerational inheritance. How? By raising the issue of uncertainty.

> Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity. Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun. For there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil (Eccl. 2:18–21).[2]

If there is no legitimate hope in inheritance, then there is no legitimate hope in progress. If there is no hope in progress, then history remains undifferentiated. Good and bad, wisdom and foolishness, wealth and poverty can and do offset each other. Death, being impersonal, does not care, one way or the other. Death does not differentiate. Inheritance is not guaranteed.

C. Imputation

For autonomous man, death does not impute—assess and declare—anything to history. It just swallows up history. Death does not favor one belief over another, or one behavior over another. It imposes the same negative sanction on all living creatures: the end.

The Preacher sees this, and he despairs. "Therefore I went about

1. Chapter 1.
2. Chapter 4.

to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun" (Eccl. 2:20). He loses hope. He does so representatively on behalf of autonomous man. He declares his confidence that death swallows all living creatures. It does so indiscriminately. There is no meaning to death. Therefore, there is no meaning to life, which death overcomes, species by species. The sovereignty of death is greater than the sovereignty of life.

D. Laying Down the Law

Faith in the sovereignty of death stands in sharp contrast to faith in the sovereignty of God. The Book of Ecclesiastes presents both positions. This is why it is difficult for expositors to deal with this book.

The Preacher makes his case against autonomy in terms of the most fundamental fact in the philosophy of autonomy: death. The philosophy of autonomy declares its commitment to mankind, but mankind is composed of dying men. The Preacher reminds his readers of the sovereignty of death. He does not want his readers to avoid this most fundamental doctrine of autonomy. Autonomy declares that, because no God has laid down the law, man gets to. This means, paraphrasing C. S. Lewis, that some men lay down the law for others.[3] Here is a great incentive for ambitious men to obtain positions of authority. They want to lay down the law to others, not have the law laid down to them. Their religion is the power religion.[4]

Conclusion

Death is sovereign in the philosophy of autonomy. There is no eternal God who lays down the law and imposes sanctions. Lacking a cosmic personal sovereign who lays down the law to the cosmos, autonomous man attempts to lay down the law to nature. But man is part of nature. Every living creature dies. Death swallows up all legal claims. Man's legal claim to the right to lay down the law to nature, including other men, is based exclusively on power. *Autonomy leads to the power religion*. But death swallows up every man. Autonomous man is ultimately powerless against death. He cannot legitimately declare, as Paul declared, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory" (I Cor. 15:55).[5]

3. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Touchstone, [1944] 1996), pp. 68–70.

4. Gary North, *Authority and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Exodus* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), Part 1, *Representation and Dominion* (1985).

5. Gary North, *Judgment and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on First Corinthians*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2001] 2012), ch. 15.

4

UNCERTAIN INHERITANCE

Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity. Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun. For there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil.

ECCLESIASTES 2:18–21

A. Laboring in Vain

In retrospect, he says, he hates all of his labor. Why? Because he must leave it to the person who will inherit it. There is no way for him to know whether the person who will inherit the works of his labor will be a wise man or a fool. In either case, he will rule over all of the Preacher's labor (v. 19).

The Preacher understands the meaning of labor. A person labors to buy goods, and these goods are then inherited by someone else. This is the same, economically speaking, as inheriting the person's labor. Labor is manifested in its fruits. It is also manifested in capital equipment. We say that labor is embodied in this equipment. This is a metaphor, not a measurable phenomenon. It is not a metaphysical process.[1]

1. Karl Marx spoke of capital as being congealed labor time. "As values, all commodities are only definite masses of congealed labour-time." Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1867) (New York: Modern Library edition, a reprint of the 1906 edition, published by Charles H. Kerr), p. 46. He really did believe that labor time's

The Preacher has an implicit argument. The value he places on his past labor is dependent on the value of uses to which his capital will be put in the future. He believes that if a fool inherits his capital, he has wasted his time. He has accumulated wealth for a fool. The fool may value this inheritance, but he will use it foolishly. In this sense, it would have been better had the Preacher not devoted labor to accumulating his vast stores of capital. This inheritance can be squandered by his heir. There is no way of knowing in advance whether or not the heir will be competent.

This passage points to the inescapable connection between past, present, and future. He assesses the value of his past labor, but in doing so, he must make an assessment of the uses to which the output of his labor will be put in the future. This establishes a fundamental principle of economic imputation: *the retroactive value of the past is dependent upon the expected value of the future*. If a fool inherits his wealth, the value of his present goods is an illusion. It is nothing but vanity. He has wasted his time.

He imputes value to his present capital on the basis of his assessment of its future value in the hands of a fool. He therefore concludes that all is vanity. This presumes that a fool will inherit his wealth. But a wise person may inherit his wealth. The Preacher does not know who will inherit his wealth. But, because he cannot be sure that the outcome will be positive, he imputes no value to his present goods. He also retroactively imputes zero value to his past labor. He calls it all vanity. Nothing has any value, because he cannot be sure that the person who inherits his wealth will be competent.

The Preacher is legitimately concerned about the use to which his capital will be put. But the fact that he does not know for sure what use his capital will be put leads to a false conclusion: all is vanity. On the basis of his inability to impute future value to his present goods, he imputes no value at all to his future goods, and retroactively dismisses the value of his past labor. Because he is not omniscient regarding the future, he concludes that all is vanity.

This is a counsel of despair. No one can know the future exhaustively. No one can be sure that the person who inherits his legacy will put it to productive use. For a covenant-keeper, the fact that the future is uncertain is not the same as saying that the future is vanity.

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role in establishing value is somehow measurable. He built his system on this fallacy. Gary North, *Marx's Religion of Revolution: Regeneration Through Chaos* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1968] 1989), ch. 3.

Covenant-keepers lay up treasure in the present in order that their heirs will continue to put it to good use. They trust in God's promises of inheritance by covenant-keepers. This inheritance is the foundation of the expansion of the kingdom (civilization) of God in history.

B. No Autonomy

Autonomous man's error is to assume that his lack of omniscience is sufficient to dismiss all value and meaning. The Preacher is arguing on the assumption that an individual is sovereign in imputing value to the present and the past. Because he cannot accurately predict the future use of his capital, he imputes no value to the future, the present, or the past. He calls it all vanity. This is the statement of a self-professed autonomous man. But no man is autonomous. God is autonomous, but man is not. God imputes value in a sovereign way, but man does not. *The fact that man is not God is not a legitimate reason to conclude that all is vanity*. Some things are vain, but other things are not. God imputes value and meaning, so covenant-keepers, who are made in God's image, are also supposed to impute value and meaning. Indeed, there is no way for any rational person to escape this responsibility, for which he will be judged. Men are to use God's standards to do this. They are not to act as autonomous beings. They are to regard themselves as subordinate evaluators who are working on God's behalf as God's stewards.

The Preacher is arguing in terms of the logic of self-professed autonomous man. He is showing that the assertion of autonomy is futile. Because no man is omniscient, every assertion of autonomy leads to a conclusion: all is vanity. Because man cannot impute final value, he supposes that no one can. If no one can, then there is no final value. *If there is no final value, then there is no present value*. All is vanity.

Here is the economic application of this logic. *The value of capital goods in the present is dependent on expectations of the value of capital's output in the future*. This is the logic of modern economics, beginning with the marginalist revolution of the early 1870s, when economists began abandoning the labor theory of value as well as all cost-of-production theories of value. Value is imputed subjectively, economists concluded. Capital's value today is dependent on expected consumer demand.

The Preacher speaks of the wise use of an inheritance. The economist does not speak of wise use. He speaks of profitable use. But both analyses depend on *present imputation of expected future value*. If

the value of capital goods today is dependent upon the wise uses to which these goods will be put in the distant future, this creates *an endless chain of meaninglessness*. Because we cannot perfectly foresee the future use of our capital, and because those who inherit will also not be able to see into the future, value and meaning disappear. Future value is like the mythological elephant that supports the world. It stands on a giant turtle. What does the turtle stand on? Another turtle. It is turtles all the way down. *There is no system of imputation that autonomous man can legitimately establish as authoritative*.

Expectations regarding the future always shape the present. Uncertainty regarding the future reduces the value of assets in the present. If the future is uncertain, then the present value of everything is equally uncertain. If the present is uncertain, the Preacher says, it is vanity.

The implication of this passage is that humanism has no way of confidently declaring that something is either good or bad, valuable or worthless, or anything in between. If the correct assessment of the present is dependent on an autonomous and infallible prediction of the future, then *there can be no correct assessment of value in the present*. The Preacher calls all such imputation vanity. He has already argued that death swallows up the fool and the wise man. Death is the common denominator. The only way for an individual to assess accurately the present value of anything is to know what value it will have in the future, after his own death. But death swallows up all imputations. Every person who imputes will die. Every person who imputes value lacks knowledge of the future. So, the Preacher says, all is vanity.

Imputation is a process in time. It is dependent on expectations about the future. *Christian economics rests on the theory of an omniscient Creator who sees the future perfectly. This God also imputes value authoritatively in terms of His standards*. He makes no mistakes. He perfectly assesses the meaning and value of everything in terms of His own permanent ethical standards. *God knows the future, so He can accurately impute value in the present*. He can also impute value retroactively, which He will do at the final judgment. Imputation by God is past, present, and future. God is omniscient.

In coming to the conclusion that all is vanity, the Preacher speaks as a consistent humanist must speak. He speaks in the name of an uncertain future. He concludes that uncertainty undermines the concept of value. Everything in the future is like a kaleidoscope's image: constantly shifting. Result: vanity.

C. Subordinate Imputation

Christian economics affirms the absolute sovereignty of God, the absolute accuracy of God's imputation of economic value, and the perfection of the final judgment. Christian economics also teaches that men are made in the image of God. Therefore, they possess the ability to think God's thoughts after Him. They can impute economic value in history because God imputes economic value in history. Also, they can impute economic value because they have access to permanent standards of judgment. They have access to the Bible and Bible-revealed law. They can make accurate assessments as creatures because they are made in the image of God. God holds them responsible for making assessments in the present. They must do so on the basis of what they know is coming, which is the final judgment. They possess the law and the prophets. They possess the revelation of Jesus Christ. They possess access to the Bible. So, they are capable of making imperfect but relevant judgments regarding the past, present, and future.

Not until the final section of the Book of Ecclesiastes does the Preacher issue his conclusion. He states it plainly. Men are to obey God's law. "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Eccl. 12:13–14).[2] If covenant-keepers do this, they will make *accurate though imperfect economic judgments*. They will perceive that all is not vanity. Having perceived this, they can work confidently in the present for the sake of an uncertain future. It is uncertain to them, but it is not uncertain to God. God imputes value to their work in the present, because He imputes value to the work of their heirs.

D. Inheritance and Historical Linearity

In the name of autonomous man, the Preacher has affirmed the death of every generation. "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever" (Eccl. 1:4). This statement appears in a passage that affirms the cyclical pattern of natural events.

> The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto

2. Chapter 45.

> the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again (Eccl. 1:5–7).

This outlook favors the ancient world's assumption that history is cyclical.[3] Without inheritance, the replacement generations do not change the pattern of life.

The Old Covenant rejects such a view of history. It affirms that a personal God created the universe. God also brings judgments in history. History is linear. The proof of this linearity is the pattern of inheritance.

> What man is he that feareth the LORD? him shall he teach in the way that he shall choose. His soul shall dwell at ease; and his seed shall inherit the earth. The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant (Psalm 25:12–14).

> For evildoers shall be cut off: but those that wait upon the LORD, they shall inherit the earth (Psalm 37:9).

> But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace (Psalm 37:11).

> For such as be blessed of him shall inherit the earth; and they that be cursed of him shall be cut off (Psalm 37:22).[4]

E. Death and Inheritance

Whether the heir is a wise man or a fool makes no difference to death. Death is sovereign.

> Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity. For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool. Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit (Eccl. 2:15–17).[5]

No assured ethical principle governs the inheritance, once the autonomous owner dies. No pattern of predictable sanctions exists to direct the inheritance to covenant-breakers.

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3. Chapter 1.

4. Gary North, *Confidence and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Psalms* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), ch. 6.

5. Chapter 3.

> All things have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his wickedness. Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself? Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time? (Eccl. 7:15–17)[6]

Because death is impersonal, there is no meaning. Because death swallows up all forms of life, life is meaningless. Because inheritance is random in its effects, there is no pattern of victory or growth.

This is a counsel of despair. The Preacher recognizes this. He says that he has despaired over this knowledge. But he says this as a partisan of the philosophy of autonomy. He is making his case against autonomy by presenting the world as interpreted by autonomous man.

Conclusion

The uncertainty of inheritance undermines men's confidence in their posthumous futures. This makes men less effective entrepreneurs and accumulators of capital. Consumption is preferable to capital accumulation. "Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun" (Eccl. 8:15).[7]

The value of capital in the present is dependent in part on its value in the future. But that is true of the future, too. There is no sure economic value in the present if there is no final imputation of economic value in the future. There is no final judgment, the Preacher says. There is only cyclical nature, cyclical history, and individual death. This is vanity.

6. Chapter 27.
7. Chapter 31.

5

TRANSITION TO BIBLICAL COVENANTALISM

For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity. There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.

ECCLESIASTES 2:22–24

When presented as a unit, these three verses create confusion. Without warning, the Preacher moves from a counsel of despair to a counsel of confidence. Why?

The Preacher asserts that the burdens of labor are great, and the results of our labor are problematical. He asks a rhetorical question: "For what hath man of all his labour, and of the taxation of his heart, wherein he hath labored under the sun" (v. 22)? So far in the book of Ecclesiastes, we have read that all is vanity. If all is vanity, then the output of labor is vanity. Then what are the blessings of labor, in and of themselves? There are none. "For all his days are sorrows, and his travails grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity" (v. 23).

A. Adam's Curse

The curse on Adam involved the curse of his labor. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. 3:19).[1] The negative sanction brought pain to mankind.

1. Gary North, *Sovereignty and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Genesis* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1982] 2012), ch. 12.

Labor was not originally a painful activity. It was a responsible activity, but it was not painful. The pain of labor is God's curse for the sin of Adam. It is not surprising that the Preacher has discovered that labor is filled with grief. That was the whole idea of the curse. If labor were constantly joyful, then the curse would be removed. The curse has not been removed, so labor has negative features.

God has brought judgment in history, and He will bring final judgment at the end of history. The pain of labor points to the pain of final judgment. But this pain will not be experienced by covenant-keepers. The pain of labor can be regarded as an advantage, for it points to deliverance in the future. This deliverance is based on progressive sanctification in history.

The Preacher is presenting the arguments of a covenant-breaking man. He finds that everything is vanity. It is vanity because covenant-breaking man asserts his autonomy from the God of the Bible, the law of the Bible, and the sanctions of this law. Autonomous man wants to believe that he does not have to consider the covenant. This is a fatal mistake. The Preacher is exploring covenant-breaking man's hoped-for avenues of escape from the sanctions of God. One of the negative sanctions of God is the curse on man's labor. The Preacher insists that his own labor has been futile. It has produced nothing but vanity. Because it has produced nothing but vanity, it can be said that labor itself is vanity. It is a waste of time. It is more than a waste of time; it is negative in and of itself.

B. A Call to Enjoyment

Next, he says that there is nothing better for a man to do in life that to eat and drink. A man should make his soul enjoy his labor. At this point, the expositor faces a challenge. Is this conclusion an extension of the logic of autonomous man, or is it a transition to biblical covenantalism?

Autonomous man is present-oriented. Death is sovereign.[2] Incompetents inherit.[3] This exhortation to enjoy what you possess could be a logical conclusion of autonomy. Thrift is a curse. Thrift builds up capital for another person to inherit. So does excessive work. The past is vanity. The future is vanity. The present is enjoyable. Why not enjoy whatever you have accumulated so far? The present is assured. The future is uncertain. A bird in hand is worth two under the bush.

2. Chapter 3.
3. Chapter 4.

But there is a phrase that indicates that he has made a transition: "he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour." Why should autonomous man enjoy his labor? Isn't labor a burden? Isn't it vanity? This is what he has just said. "For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night."

Then, without warning, he praises labor. He says that his insight is based on this fact: a man's wealth and labor are from the hand of God (v. 24). This appears to be an affirmation of the God of the Bible. This interpretation is confirmed by what he says in verse 26. "For God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God. This also is vanity and vexation of spirit.[4] "In verse 24, he has begun his move from pessimism to optimism. *He has moved from autonomy to theonomy*. He will soon praise ethics as the basis of prosperity (v. 26).

Conclusion

In these verses, we see a shift of argumentation from covenantbreaking to covenant-keeping. The Preacher switches arguments because he switches his perspective. What he has said previously applies to the covenant-breaker. It does not apply to the covenant-keeper. Labor is vanity and vexation of spirit for covenant-breakers. It should not be for covenant-keepers.

4. Chapter 6.

6

PREDICTABLE ETHICAL SANCTIONS

For God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God. This also is vanity and vexation of spirit.

ECCLESIASTES 2:26

A. Vanity and Vexation

Moses in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 announced that God brings positive corporate sanctions to covenant-keeping societies. God also imposes negative corporate sanctions on covenant-breaking societies. This passage announces that God does the same with individuals. The Preacher then announces that this is vanity and vexation of spirit.

Why should he regard this system of historical sanctions as vanity and vexation of spirit? Throughout the book, he refers to the sovereignty of death as dominant.[1] Death swallows all of a man's output in life. Through the wealth left behind at a man's death, an heir will inherit. The accumulator of capital does not have any control over what his legacy will accomplish. The morality and skills of the heirs are indeterminate.[2]

He says that the sinner is given travail, "to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God." This is what Solomon announced: "A good man leaveth an inheritance to his children's children: and the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just" (Prov. 13:22).[3] Why should this be vanity and produce vexation of spirit?

1. Chapters 3, 7, 30, 33, 35.
2. Chapters 2, 4, 5, 7, 13, 19, 21.
3. Gary North, *Wisdom and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Proverbs* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2007] 2012), ch. 41.

For a covenant-keeper, this system of historical causation can and should serve as the basis of an explicitly covenantal view of history. It offers legitimate hope for compound growth in every area of life. It means that the kingdom of God will steadily and inevitably dislodge the kingdoms of men in history. The wealth of the just is not laid up for the sinner. The covenant affirms that positive sanctions compound over time. The Preacher affirms this in this passage.

Then why does he dismiss this system of causation as vanity and vexation of spirit? Because he is speaking about the covenant-breaker's assessment of cause and effect. The covenant-breaker is vexed, not the covenant-keeper.

B. A Search and Expose Mission

The Preacher is conducting a search-and-expose mission against the philosophy of autonomous man. For a defender of autonomous man to realize that God has structured His system of individual sanctions in history to take away wisdom and joy from covenant-deniers, leaving them the unpleasant task of heaping up capital that will be inherited by covenant-keepers, is a form of vexation. The righteous get both wisdom and joy; the unrighteous get a life of meaningless hard labor.

The Preacher complains repeatedly about the hard work that careful thinking involves. The end of wisdom is a dead end. It is futile.

> When I applied mine heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth: (for also there is that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes:) Then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea further; though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it (Eccl. 8:16–17).[4]

Yet righteous men escape this burden. They get wisdom plus joy. This fact is vexatious for a covenant-breaker. It means that *the universe is a personally rigged system*. The battles of life do not take place on a level playing field. They take place on a playing field that is tilted to give advantages to covenant-keepers. The teams do not change sides on the field in the second half.

Conclusion

There is no clearer statement in the Bible than this verse with respect to the ethical basis of God's covenantal structure of individual

4. Chapter 32.

causation. Covenant-keepers get blessings and capital. Covenant-breakers get the hard labor, risk, and the uncertainty involved in accumulating wealth, only to see it transferred to covenant-keepers. The Preacher acknowledges that this system was operational in his day. That it did exist vexes him. It vexes him in his self-designated capacity as a debater on the side of autonomous man.

If this system of ethical causation were annulled by the New Testament, it would no longer vex the Preacher, were he still alive, insofar as he spoke in the name of autonomous man. Autonomous man hopes that economic causation is not rigged in favor of covenant-keepers. So do millions of Christians.

Christians who fear the increase in personal responsibility that always accompanies greater wealth and influence (Luke 12:47–48)[5] may find the Preacher's observations compelling: vanity and vexation. This is their theological problem. They do not understand that the reason why God gives wealth and influence to covenant-keeping individuals and societies is so that they can exercise greater responsibility. Responsibility-evading Christians do not acknowledge the dominion covenant.[6]

Unless this system of ethics-based economic causation has been explicitly reversed by the New Covenant, it still operates in New Testament times. I began studying this question in detail in 1973. It is now 2012. I have written 31 volumes indicating that this system of ethical causation still operates in economic affairs. It is the critics' responsibility to provide counter-evidence. So far, they have refused to respond to my evidence. I have waited a long time. I gather that I will have to wait even longer.

5. Gary North, *Treasure and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Luke*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 28.

6. Gary North, *Sovereignty and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Genesis* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, Christian Economics, 2012), ch. 4.

7

GODLY TIME AND BEASTLY TIME

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.

ECCLESIASTES 3:1

A. Time for Everything

The third chapter of the book of Ecclesiastes is probably its most famous chapter.[1] Chapter three describes familiar aspects of life. It covers the full range of human experience.

There is a poetic aspect to the chapter that makes it memorable.

> A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace (vv. 2–8).

This list covers life-and-death issues and also minor issues. The reigning principle is this: *each event has its own time*. Each event is associated with comprehensive purposes under heaven. The timing of each event is not random. "He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end" (Eccl. 3:11).

1. There was a popular song in the 1960s, *Turn, Turn, Turn*, which was based on this chapter. Millions of young people heard it, never knowing its origin.

This passage is not only poetic; it is profound. It is profound because it rests on a dual presupposition: the omniscience of God and the providence of God. It begins with the concept of purpose. If there is a time for every purpose under heaven, the implication is that *purpose is simultaneously divine and temporal*. The events of life are related to the events of eternity. This is why he says that the events cannot be changed. "I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him" (Eccl. 3:14). These events are permanent. Furthermore, God judges them. The Preacher speaks of the judgment of God in relation to purpose for every work. "I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work" (v. 17).

B. Rival Views in One Passage

There are elements of this passage that indicate that he is still arguing on the basis of cyclical history.[2] He says that what happens today has happened before. "That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past" (v. 15). This was the common view of history in the ancient pagan world. It was only after the triumph of Christianity that the concept of linear time spread beyond the geographical limits of Palestine.

What does the author mean by saying that what is today has already been? If this is to be reconciled with the concept of linear history, which was a uniquely biblical concept in his day, then it must refer to *the decree of God*. It refers back in time to God's plan for the ages. If there is a time for every purpose under heaven, this purpose is God's purpose. If it is God's purpose, then it is part of a decree which unfolds in time. This decree rests on the concept of the sovereignty of God. Events are not random.

Cyclical history is not the primary meaning of this passage. The idea that the past cannot be changed is clearly based on the concept of linear history. *If history is cyclical, then the past is irrelevant*. It has happened before, and it will happen again. There is nothing unique about any event in history if history is cyclical. In contrast, if history is linear, then one thing leads to another. *If there is coherence in history, and if there is meaning in history, then each event plays a role*. This is the message conveyed by chapter three. There is a time for every purpose

2. Chapter 1.

under heaven. Each period of time has relevance in relationship to all the other periods of time.

If history is linear, and if God judges every aspect of history, then history has meaning in terms of the imputation of meaning by God. God judges every aspect of history (v. 17). If God judges historical events, then He judges in terms of standards. This imputation of meaning to every event in history secures the relevance of every act in every man's life.

The concept of linear history is basic to Western civilization. It underlies another concept, which has its origin in Deuteronomy 28:1–14: long-term economic growth. The Book of Ecclesiastes does not speak of long-term economic growth, but this passage does indicate that history is linear.

C. The Role of Death

The chapter contains inconsistent principles. The author keeps referring back to death. He had already done this in chapter 3. *The divide between biological life and death is the fundamental divide in the thinking of non-Christians*. For Christianity, there is also a divide between life and death, but it takes place in history. There is physical death, but there is also eternal death. The division between eternal life and eternal death is grounded in history. *The divide between covenantal life and death is the fundamental divide in Christianity*. This divide takes place in history. "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36). Physical death delivers an individual into eternity. Eternity is marked by life and death. The Bible calls eternal death the second death. "And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death" (Rev. 20:14). Entry into eternal life takes place in history. It is confessional. It is judicial. It has to do with the special grace of God.

None of this was revealed under the Old Covenant. The division between physical life and physical death was seen as the supreme division. There are only a few passages in the Old Testament relating to life beyond the grave.[3] The author of the Book of Ecclesiastes focuses on the division between physical life and death. He does so from the perspective of the covenant-breaker. He equates the life of the beast with the life of a man, because both of them die physically. "For that

3. Job 14:14–15; Psalm 49:15; Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:1–2, 13; Hosea 13:14.

which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again" (Eccl. 3:19–20). He is emphatic: "I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts" (v. 18). He also equates the life of the wise man and the fool, because both of them die physically (Eccl. 2:14).[4]

But he also says that God judges the righteous and the wicked (Eccl. 3:17). *Because God judges the righteous and the wicked, then the differentiating criterion is ethics. It is not death*. Autonomous death is impersonal and universal. If a man is no different from a beast, then ethics has nothing to do with the individual's judicial status or his role in history. But if man is judged by God, in every act in his life, then ethics serves as the relevant criterion to distinguish man from beast, a fool from a wise man, the righteous from the wicked. Chapter 3 presents both viewpoints. This is why the chapter is difficult to interpret.

He says that a beast and a man go to the same place (v. 20). This is an application of one aspect of God's curse on Adam. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. 3:19).[5] If Adam had not been made in God's image, then the end of Adam and the end of every beast would be the same: dust. But are they the same? The author indicates that they are not. He raises a question. He asks if anyone knows the spirit of man that goes upward and the spirit of the beast that goes downward into the earth (v. 21). So, there is a difference between a beast and a man. There is more to a man than there is to a beast. The author does not speak of God's judgment of the beasts. He does speak of God's judgment of men (v. 17).

D. What Is Good for Man

He says that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for they are his portion (v. 22). Why does he conclude this? He asks this rhetorical question: Who shall bring him to see what shall be after him (v. 22)? The implied answer: no one. So, he

4. Chapter 3.

5. Gary North, *Sovereignty and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Genesis* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1982] 2012), ch. 12.

has to be content with whatever he does in his life, because he does not know how his legacy will turn out. He does not know how his legacy will be used by his heirs. This theme is found in the second chapter. The Preacher is concerned about legacy. He is concerned about what the legacy is after the death of the testator.

The recurring theme of the Book of Ecclesiastes is vanity, i.e., hopelessness. The Preacher repeatedly insists that time is characterized by vanity. Then how can covenant-keepers make sense of time? If time is cyclical, then it has no meaning. There is no cosmic judge. Everything repeats itself. Therefore, everything is equally irrelevant. On the other hand, if God judges men's actions in history, then these events are relevant in terms of the purposes of God. Individuals have purposes, but God is the judge. God evaluates the righteousness or wickedness of a particular act. *Everything that takes place takes place in terms of the decree of God*. There is a time for every purpose under heaven.

From an economic point of view, the concept of linear time makes possible the linked concepts of progress and economic growth. If time is cyclical, there is no permanent progress or economic growth. Everything will repeat itself. Everything that takes place today is as relevant or as irrelevant as everything that took in a previous identical yesterday.

Conclusion

In Ecclesiastes, we are presented with rival views of time until the last few verses. The Preacher goes back and forth between the pagan view of time and the biblical view, between meaninglessness and providence. The internal debate is clearest in chapter 3. If history is cyclical, it is without purpose.[6] If history is purposeful, it is not cyclical. It is linear: beginning, development, culmination, followed by God's judgment. Then it is transcended by glorification. This is the message of the Bible and its imitations.

6. The highly popular comedy film *Groundhog Day* (1993) is a good presentation of this theme. A man who is trapped in a recurring day unsuccessfully seeks suicide. The movie cheats, because he does recall the previous days. He learns. Eventually, he repents.

8

THE JOY OF CONSUMING

I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it. He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end. I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life. And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God.

ECCLESIASTES 3:10–13

A. The Fruits of Our Labor

The Preacher continues his exposition of the purposefulness of historical events.[1] God is in charge. He has made everything beautiful in His time. He is sovereign over time. This is not autonomous man speaking.

The King James' translators made a mess of the next two verses. "I know that there is no good in them." No good in what? This makes no sense. The phrase "in them" is not in the Hebrew. The American Standard Version, published in 1901, is much clearer. It substitutes "for them" for "in them."

> He hath made everything beautiful in its time: also he hath set eternity in their heart, yet so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them, than to rejoice, and to do good so long as they live (vv. 11–12).

Quite similar is the recent English Standard Version.

> He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from

1. Chapter 7.

> the beginning to the end. I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live (vv. 11–12).

The Preacher makes three points. First, men have a sense of eternity in their hearts. This testimony confronts them all their lives. Second, men have limited understanding of past events. The details of God's work in history are closed to them. History is extremely complex. Third, men are to be content with their limited knowledge. They are to spend their lives doing good. This ethical framework undergirds this entire passage. It is clearly covenantal in its perspective.

A person should enjoy the fruits of his labor. "And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God." This emphasis on consumption is found in several passages in his book.[2] This is guilt-free consumption. This is not the lifestyle of an ascetic, nor is it the way of a monastic order.

B. Legitimate Consumption

The good products of a man's labor are God's gift to him. He possesses them lawfully. Therefore, he can consume them legitimately. There is no suggestion that consumption is some form of ethical deviation. A man has expended what lawfully belonged to him: his labor. From this expenditure has come a reward. The Preacher calls it a gift from God.

This is not the first time he uses the language of consumption. "There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God" (Eccl. 2:24). The context of this affirmation was one of despair and futility. The fruit of a man's labor can be inherited by another. This seems to be a great waste.

> For there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil. For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity (Eccl. 2:21–23).[3]

The future is uncertain. The present is certain. Therefore, he concluded, a wise man should enjoy whatever belongs to him for as long as he can. *There is no hope in inheritance*. This is a present-oriented outlook. It makes sense for autonomous man.

2. Chapters 5, 8, 20.
3. Chapter 5.

How much sense does it make for a covenant-keeper? Here, he concludes the same as he did before, but he does so on a different basis. It has to do with the providence of God. "I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him" (Eccl. 3:14). God is absolutely sovereign over the affairs of men. When labor produces fruits, they may lawfully be consumed by the owner. But this legal right of consumption is not the result of despair over the future. On the contrary, the Preacher affirms that God is in control over all things. Why should a godly man despair? *Consumption is an affirmation of the future*. "There is more where that came from!"

C. The Decree of God

Then the Preacher adds something that has baffled commentators. "That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past" (v. 15). The Hebrew word translated "requireth" is obscure. Commentators and translators cannot agree about its meaning. Some have translated it as "driven away" (ESV). Others have translated it as "passed away" (ASV). Another: "does everything over and over again" (CEV).[4] The mid-nineteenthcentury commentator, E. W. Hengstenberg, invoked a Psalm to explain it. "Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them" (Psalm 139:16). He explained the passage as a matter of God's decree. The decree is past; the event is recent. He wrote that "our whole existence from beginning to end is pre-ordained by God. . . . What was (or became) is already, existed already in the divine counsels before it was openly manifested, and hence we learn, that God's decrees decide everything. . . ."[5] The phrase, "That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been," refers to the decree of God. The events of today and tomorrow have their origin in the distant past, before the foundation of the world. Paul wrote:

> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should

4. Contemporary English Version.

5. E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1860), p. 111.

> be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved (Eph. 1:3–6).

This approach to the text makes more sense than numerous commentators' convoluted attempts to explain this passage without adopting the theory of cyclical history that the Preacher presents in the book's opening words. One commentator proclaims, "It is *God* who keeps the cycles of nature and history going; the believer's hope is as immutable as the pessimist's despair."[6] But if history is cyclical, where is the hope of progress? That is the heart of the pessimist's despair.

D. Judgment and Progress

The Preacher then ties what he has said about a time for every purpose under heaven to the doctrine of God's judgment. *This is the doctrine of sanctions*. Recall that the Preacher was speaking of history, not eternity. The chapter is about the events of history. "And moreover I saw under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there; and the place of righteousness, that iniquity was there. I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work" (Eccl. 3:16–17). God will judge evil judges in His good time. He will restore justice.

The idea here is that history is not random, nor is it cyclical. It is under the sovereignty of God, whose decree governs all things. Unjust judges will be brought under God's judgment. The reign of evildoers will end. Later, he declares: "If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter: for he that is higher than the highest regardeth; and there be higher than they" (Eccl. 5:8).[7]

The hope of *a future reign of justice* is not thwarted by the doctrine of cyclical history. It is strengthened by the doctrine of the providence of God. What appears to be a reaffirmation of cyclical history—"That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been"—is in fact its refutation. History moves forward according to God's decree. His promise to Adam and Eve is inescapable. "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15).

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6. Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), p. 82.

7. Chapter 17.

Conclusion

The Preacher recommends joyful consumption, not because this is man's only refuge in a hostile, meaningless world in which the future is uncertain, but because God is in complete control. *We can consume today because we have hope in tomorrow*. As the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed, "It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him" (Lam. 3:22–24).

Covenant man is a producer and a consumer. He consumes in confidence because the fruits of his labor are assured, not just in his own lifetime but in years to come. Given God's decree before the foundation of the world, "That which is to be hath already been."

9

OPPRESSION AND THE OPPRESSED

So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter.

ECCLESIASTES 4:1

A. A Sign of Corruption

One of the marks of a corrupt society is this: there is extensive oppression of the weak. The weak are generally categorized by three groups: widows, orphans, and strangers. Throughout the Old Covenant, there are warnings to oppressors. The Mosaic law was hostile to oppressors. The Preacher is hostile to oppression.

This passage says explicitly that the oppressor uses power to oppress people. What is the meaning of "power"? The Hebrew word means what it does in English: *strength*. It also can refer to ability. "And thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth" (Deut. 8:17).[1] The Preacher says that the oppressors have power, but the victims have no comforter. This indicates that the Preacher is concerned about the misuse of power. The oppressors had power on their side; the oppressed had no one. This indicates that both the power and the comforter were personal. *He was not speaking of impersonal forces. He was speaking of judicial authorities*. He was speaking of people standing ready to intervene on one side or the other.

1. Gary North, *Inheritance and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1999] 2012), ch. 21.

B. No Comforter?

The Preacher identifies the problem: *the misuse of power by oppressors*. These people know that the civil government will not intervene to defend the victims. The victims have no comforter. They are helpless. This is why the oppressors are in a position to oppress them.

The Preacher is ignoring what the Bible teaches about God as the Comforter. The psalmist cried out: "Judge me, O God, and plead my cause against an ungodly nation: O deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man" (Psalm 43:1). The Psalms contain many passages about God as Deliverer. The phrase "right hand," referring to God's power, appears repeatedly.

> I have called upon thee, for thou wilt hear me, O God: incline thine ear unto me, and hear my speech. Shew thy marvellous lovingkindness, O thou that savest by thy right hand them which put their trust in thee from those that rise up against them (Psalm 17:6–7).

> We will rejoice in thy salvation, and in the name of our God we will set up our banners: the LORD fulfil all thy petitions. Now know I that the LORD saveth his anointed; he will hear him from his holy heaven with the saving strength of his right hand. Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the LORD our God. They are brought down and fallen: but we are risen, and stand upright (Psalm 20:5–8).

So, the Preacher is speaking as a covenant-breaker. He is not testifying faithfully to the character of God. He is saying that the oppressed appear to be without a comforter.

What he saw with his eyes is not in fact the case. The vanity that he sees in this oppression is an illusion. There is a source of justice in history. "Thou hast a mighty arm: strong is thy hand, and high is thy right hand. Justice and judgment are the habitation of thy throne: mercy and truth shall go before thy face" (Psalm 89:13–14).

C. Biblical Law

The Preacher does not suggest a reform in this passage, but he does in the final verses of the book. "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Eccl. 12:13–14).[2]

There is a standard of justice: biblical law. The question then is this: What does biblical law teach about oppression and deliverance?

2. Chapter 45.

First, it tells the oppressed to call on God's name. "Let the sinners be consumed out of the earth, and let the wicked be no more. Bless thou the LORD, O my soul. Praise ye the LORD" (Psalm 104:35).

Second, it provides standards of justice: biblical statutes. Those seeking deliverance from injustice need to have a standard of justice that is reliable and permanent. This standard exists.

Biblical economic law rests on the concept of God as sovereign Owner. Its fundamental economic law of justice is this: "Thou shalt not steal" (Ex. 20:15).[3] Then there is the principle of restitution.

> If a man shall steal an ox, or a sheep, and kill it, or sell it; he shall restore five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. If a thief be found breaking up, and be smitten that he die, there shall no blood be shed for him. If the sun be risen upon him, there shall be blood shed for him; for he should make full restitution; if he have nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. If the theft be certainly found in his hand alive, whether it be ox, or ass, or sheep; he shall restore double (Ex. 22:1–4).[4]

The principle of the landmark must be obeyed. This is another defense against theft.

> Thou shalt not remove thy neighbour's landmark, which they of old time have set in thine inheritance, which thou shalt inherit in the land that the LORD thy God giveth thee to possess it (Deut. 19:14).[5]

> Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set (Prov. 22:28).[6]

The Mosaic law protected society against oppressors. When it was not enforced by government, beginning with self-government, oppressors began to emerge.

This view of oppression is rarely discussed by the social critics who want to substitute other law-orders for biblical law.

D. The Social Gospel

Defenders of the Social Gospel and other proponents of increased state power in the name of Christian evangelicalism see the words "oppress" and "oppression," and they conclude that the text is talking about rich people who oppress poor people by hiring them at low

3. Gary North, *Authority and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Exodus* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), Part 2, *Decalogue and Dominion* (1986), ch. 5.

4. *Ibid*., Part 3, *Tools of Dominion* (1990), ch. 43.

5. North, *Inheritance and Dominion*, ch. 44.

6. Gary North, *Wisdom and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Proverbs* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2007] 2012), ch. 70.

wages or by paying them too little money for the goods they sell. The focus of their outrage is the free market. They are hostile to the principle of voluntary exchange. They are hostile to the concept of a social order which is based on voluntary exchange, contracts, and markets for making bids to buy and sell. They believe that the free-market social order is characterized by oppression. They never explain the free-market as the product of the private property system which the Mosaic law required, and which Jesus and the authors of the New Testament epistles did not oppose and did not criticize. Their hostility to the free market is total. They give no sign whatsoever of understanding even the most fundamental of free-market principles, such as supply and demand. They are actively opposed to that other fundamental principle of the free market: *high bid wins*. They want other winners and other winning principles. They do not discuss the details of these alternatives, such as allocation by political power or allocation by standing in line. Then there is that other familiar distribution system, allocation by sexual favors.

This hostility to the free-market social order colors everything that Social Gospel advocates write about the economy or what the Bible supposedly says about economics.[7] This is to be expected. What I write is colored my understanding of the free-market social order, which is the result of the system of private property which was established by the Mosaic law. There is no escape from one's presuppositions about the way the world works. The main question is not what the writers' presuppositions are. The main question is what the Bible really says.

Conclusion

"So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter." The Preacher is speaking as a covenant-breaker. He is criticizing the social order around him. If he was Solomon, as seems likely, he was in a position to deliver the oppressed from the hand of the oppressors. He could serve as a comforter. Why such despair?

He was commenting on the way of the world. This is the way the world operates in the eyes of decent autonomous men. There is no deliverance from oppression. All this is vanity. It is also incorrect.

7. Joel McDurmon, *God Versus Socialism: A Biblical Critique of the New Social Gospel* (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, 2009).

10

ENVY UNDERMINES SUCCESS

Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit.

ECCLESIASTES 4:4

A. Envious Neighbors

The Preacher speaks representatively as a covenant-breaker. He speaks as if there were no God who evaluates human actions, and who then brings judgment, both in history and eternity.

He says that men—literally *males*, the Hebrew word indicates—are envied by their neighbors. Those close to a man are his silent enemies. They resent him. Why? Because of the advantages he possesses: right works. The phrase is not talking about good works in the sense of charitable works. It means works that offer a person an advantage.

The man works hard, the text says. Tasks impose costs. The man does not operate on the assumption that he can get something for nothing. He sacrifices in the present for the sake of the future. This buys him no favor with his critics. They resent his success just as much as if he had inherited his wealth. It is his success that they resent. He is unable to justify his wealth to his critics.

The Preacher understands that envy is a common sin in every society that has not taken active steps to reduce it. I do not mean judicial steps. I mean social steps. Children must be taught from an early stage not to resent those who are more successful than they are. Much of the process we call socialization is a system of instruction to increase social cooperation by reducing people's indulgence in envy.

B. The Seeming Futility of Success

In a society in which envy is common, success is not worth the effort it requires. The Preacher dismisses success as vanity. It elicits envy. Who needs success on these terms?

This assumes that success is generic, that no one distinguishes one success from another. Success of every kind elicits envy. Because most people seek to avoid envy, their quest for success is futile. Their success comes not only at the price of the travail required to reach it and maintain it. It comes at the price of envy.

But what if this assumption is incorrect? What if other people do distinguish one form of success from another? What if envy is selective? What if people do possess and honor standards of success that distinguish between vanity and productivity? In a society that resents all success, then the Preacher's point is well taken. To achieve success is vanity. It will not satisfy the achiever if he wishes to be respected or loved or honored. This is the society the Preacher perceives. It is a society that is not affected by biblical preaching.

Success is legitimate. It is the appropriate reward for covenant-keeping.

> This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success (Josh. 1:8).

> And keep the charge of the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, that thou mayest prosper in all that thou doest, and whithersoever thou turnest thyself (I Kings 2:3).

The Preacher is not speaking on behalf of a society that is governed by the providence of God in terms of His law. It is governed by some other god or principle of judgment.

Conclusion

The Preacher disdains success. He does so in the name of a covenant-breaking society. He is hammering another nail into the coffin of covenant-breaking society. Success is not worth the required price, either on the front end—travail—or the back end: envy. He performs a cost-benefit analysis of success in a covenant-breaking society, and concludes that success is not worth the effort. *Autonomy leads to a view of the world that despairs of permanent progress*. Such an outlook is anti-

growth. Growth requires sacrifice in the present and a transfer of an ever-larger inheritance to successive generations. The cost of this sacrifice is too high for the uncertain benefits obtainable.

11

SLOTH AND STARVATION

The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh.

ECCLESIASTES 4:5

A. Folded Hands, Empty Stomach

This is a graphic metaphor. The image of a man eating his own flesh is memorable. But what does the metaphor mean?

The key to understanding this metaphor is the image of folded hands. In the Book of Proverbs, the author repeats this proverb: "Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man" (Prov. 6:10–11; 24:33–34).[1] Folded hands are an image of sloth. They are not folded in prayer.

The Preacher has provided a proverb. This proverb is placed in between two observations about the futility of the pursuit of wealth.

> Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit (v. 4).

> Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit (v. 6).

Yet this proverb rejects sloth as a way of life. *Sloth is a way of death*. It is a form of consumption: self-consumption. It purchases leisure with poverty. That is too high a price to pay, he says.

This is a covenant-keeper talking. A covenant-breaker is talking in verse 4. The Preacher in his role as a covenant-breaker dismisses all

1. Gary North, *Wisdom and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Proverbs* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2007] 2012), ch. 75.

great productivity as vanity. It gets a man envied in a covenant-breaking society.[2] The price is too high.

If a man folds his hands together, he cannot work to redeem society: to buy it back subordinately because Christ bought it back definitively (Matt. 28:18–20).[3] He cannot get rich. He cannot make any significant impact on society. He is a consumer of wealth, not a producer of wealth. He is a fool.

B. Hostility to Poverty

The Bible is hostile to poverty as a way of life. It is a condition that people are supposed to avoid.

> Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain (Prov. 30:8–9).[4]

They should pray for deliverance, not parity, just as Mary prayed.

> He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away (Luke 1:51–53).[5]

The Preacher dismisses great wealth as a source of anxiety (Eccl. 2:26).[6] Here, he dismisses sloth as source of poverty. He recommends avoiding both.

He blames poverty on sloth. Sloth is a fool's game. It is destructive. It is like feeding on your own limb. It is suicidal.

He could have blamed poverty on oppression. He had already dealt with oppression (4:1).[7] He could have referred back to oppression, but he did not. Instead, he came up with a metaphor that has survived the test of time. Three millennia later, people still imagine a man eating part of his body.

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2. Chapter 10.
3. Gary North, *Priorities and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Matthew*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 48. Cf. Kenneth L. Gentry, *The Greatness of the Great Commission: The Christian Enterprise in a Fallen World* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990).
4. North, *Wisdom and Dominion*, ch. 85.
5. Gary North, *Treasure and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Luke*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 1.
6. Chapter 6.
7. Chapter 5.

Conclusion

This metaphor targets sloth. Vanity, vanity, all is vanity, but sloth is foolish vanity, which is worse than street-smart vanity. Better is one handful with quiet than two hands full with vexation of spirit. Better two hands full with vexation of spirit (v. 6)[8] than two hands folded and therefore empty. Something is better than nothing.

8. Chapter 12.

12

PEACE AND QUIET

Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit.

ECCLESIASTES 4:6

A. A New Experience

The Preacher was a man with great wealth. He could afford to savor all sides of life in his quest for meaning, including leisure and high consumption. Either he inherited his wealth or else he earned it. He had not experienced quietness.

He sees the advantages of quietness. It is preferable to travail and vexation of spirit. He has experienced travail and vexation of spirit. He sees vanity everywhere. This vexes his spirit. Here, he compares less with more. He recognizes that travail and vexation of spirit often accompany more. Better to have less.

He is not comparing something with nothing. He is comparing more with less. He speaks of a handful in one situation and two hands full in another. There is a two-to-one ratio. Under such circumstances, better one handful than two.

He is admitting that sometimes it is possible to avoid travail and vexation of spirit. He does not compare one handful, accompanied by half the travail and vexation of spirit, with two hands full and twice the travail and vexation of spirit. The negatives associated with two hands full are not present with one handful. The implication is that a person can attain a life free of the negatives.

He is not saying that there is a fixed relationship between fewer possessions and the absence of vexations. He is saying only that when

the opportunity exists to choose a lifestyle with fewer goods and no vexation, a wise man takes it. A case in point was Lot. He chose the more desirable region to live in when he departed from Abraham (Gen. 13:10–11). In Sodom, he was vexed (II Peter 2:7–8). He was surrounded by evil men. His wealth did not relieve his vexation. God delivered him by taking him away from Sodom. He lived in the hills with only his two scheming daughters to comfort him. But this was better than remaining in Sodom, even in its pre-judgment days.

B. The Spirit of Enterprise

The Preacher recommends quietness. This is not the road to riches. To accumulate great wealth peacefully, a person must be entrepreneurial. He must be willing to bear uncertainty.[1] He can lose substantial portions of his wealth. Few entrepreneurs live lives of quietness, especially when they are accumulating their wealth.

This raises a crucial question. How can the economy grow if there are few entrepreneurs? How will technology be improved? If having a little with quietness is better than having a lot with anxiety, then the God-fearing entrepreneur must either give up innovating and take a salary or else succeed in being *a calm entrepreneur*. This skill is so rare as to be unheard of. Yet this is what the covenant-keeping entrepreneur must strive to become. If he lives a life of constant turmoil in his quest for profit, he has fallen into a trap.

He must trust in God. The Psalms are filled with advice in this regard, most famously, the twenty-third Psalm. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4). If death does not scare him, why should he worry about a 23% decline in earnings in the third quarter?

C. The Apostles

What of the early apostles? They did not experience quietness. They also did not possess great wealth. Their work was kingdom-building. Yet Paul had a form of quietness: contentment.

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1. From the point of view of economic theory, he does not take risks. Risks can be dealt with by insurance because they are part of a class of events governed by the law of large numbers. The entrepreneur deals with events that are not part of a class. These events cannot be insured. The classic study on this is Frank H. Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty, and Profit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921).

> Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me (Phil. 4:11–13).[2]

For Paul, quietness was a matter of inner peace, not a low-risk environment.

With increased wealth comes increased responsibility. Jesus said,

> And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more (Luke 12:47–48).[3]

If added responsibility creates anxiety in someone's life, then the solution is to avoid additional wealth. This also applies to power, fame, and prestige.

Conclusion

To reduce the disquietude of wealth, either reduce your wealth or else reduce your concern about wealth. There is no third option. Both strategies require faith. The first requires faith that you will not fall into poverty. The second requires the same. It also requires faith that becoming less rich is not a setback worth worrying about.

2. Gary North, *Ethics and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on the Epistles* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), ch. 23.

3. Gary North, *Treasure and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Luke*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 28.

13

MINDLESS ACCUMULATION

> *There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail.*
>
> ECCLESIASTES 4:8

A. Labor on Whose Behalf?

This is a lone wolf talking. He has no close relatives. In terms of the Mosaic law, his kinsman-redeemer was distant. Who would inherit his property? No one close to him. Nevertheless, he works hard. He accumulates wealth. In the words of the Preacher, his eye is never satisfied. He is a devoted practitioner of the religion of Mammon (Matt. 6:24–25). Mammon's disciples work out their confession: "More for me in history." [1]

He does not sit quietly to examine his life. "Neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good?" By "soul," the Preacher does not mean eternal soul. He means life. But Jesus extended this to refer to his eternal soul.

> And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat,

1. Gary North, *Priorities and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Matthew*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 14.

> drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God (Luke 12:16–21).[2]

The Preacher recognizes the foolishness of the lone wolf. This is a rugged individualist. The Preacher does not say that he works alone. The man's isolated status is familistic. He has no close heirs. He slaves away for the benefit of near-strangers. He does so knowingly, unlike the residents of Canaan in the years before the invasion of the Israelites.

A man in Israel who had no heir had no name. The law governing the inheritance of a married man without a son required his nearby brother to father a child with the widow. Why? To maintain his name in Israel.

> If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband's brother unto her. And it shall be, that the firstborn which she beareth shall succeed in the name of his brother which is dead, that his name be not put out of Israel (Deut. 25:5–6).[3]

This law applied only to a brother who lived in close proximity. It did not apply to a distant brother.

The man described by the Preacher has no child and no brother. It is not said whether he has a wife. As far as his inheritance mattered—his name in Israel—this did not matter. There would be no brotherly marriage. If he died and his widow remarried, the land would go to her children. Her new husband's name would be established in Israel. His would be forgotten—judicially forgotten. This was a great curse in Mosaic Israel.

B. Rugged Individualism

There is an American tradition extolling the rugged individualist. Given the intensely cooperative history of the United States, this is a tradition without meaningful examples. There were trappers and explorers in early America, but they are extolled for their exploits of bravery and survival, not their legacy. The most famous of these rug-

2. Gary North, *Treasure and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Luke*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 25.

3. Gary North, *Inheritance and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1999] 2012), ch. 64.

ged individualists, Daniel Boone, was in fact a land developer in the late eighteenth century. He moved west, but only after he had established a community: Boonesborough, Kentucky. He left for Missouri in 1799 when he could not get his land claims settled.

Alexis de Tocqueville, visiting the United States for less than a year in the spring of 1831, penned these memorable words, widely read and widely accepted, which were published in 1840 and which have remained in print ever since.

> Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions, constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds—religious, moral, serious, futile, extensive, or restricted, enormous or diminutive. The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found establishments for education, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; and in this manner they found hospitals, prisons, and schools. If it be proposed to advance some truth, or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society. Wherever, at the head of some new undertaking, you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association.[4]

The Preacher has little use for the rugged individualist. He has no use for any kind of individualism. Men are covenant creatures. They live in communities bound by covenants. They are bound to each other through family, tradition, exchange, and formal covenants.

The man who works exclusively for himself is an aberration. He has given his life to the pursuit of vanity. If there is one character in Anglo-American literature who embodies this lifestyle, it is Ebenezer Scrooge. His deliverance—his redemption—is achieved through holiday celebration of a Christless Christmas. His heir, through his own choice, is Tiny Tim. The rugged individualist dies when he sees the grave of Christmas future.

C. Methodological Individualism

The logic of the free market explains economic motivation as self-interest. The Preacher explains this as a matter of blindness. He is accumulating an inheritance for strangers. His legacy is under his control only for a few years. His ability to shape the use of that inheritance is non-existent. This does not apply to him: "Train up a child in the way

4. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols., translated by Henry Reeve (Gutenberg Project, [1840]), II:II:V.

he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6). He has no child.

This means that the methodological individualism of Adam Smith's economics is also a matter of blindness. Economic theory must be qualified by covenantal considerations, the most important being inheritance. Family inheritance, like family resource allocation, is not governed by the free market's supreme law of pricing: high bid wins.

The principle of methodological covenantalism governs Christian economics. The free market is more than a system based on private property and voluntary exchange. Covenant is superior to contract, both judicially and conceptually.

Conclusion

The Preacher identifies a blind man. He accumulates wealth, but for what purpose? His covenantal legal status is in conflict with his contractual economic status. He is building up wealth for strangers to inherit. He is a one-generation man. Such a person is blinded by vanity, according to the Preacher.

14

THE DIVISION OF LABOR

Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

ECCLESIASTES 4:9–12

A. Trinitarian Economics

The origin of this recommendation is the Trinity. God is three persons. In relation to the creation, each has specific tasks. Jesus said of the Holy Spirit,

> But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you (John 14:26).

> But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning (John 15:26–27).

He said of Himself, "I must be about my Father's business" (Luke 2:49b). The context was work.

> But Jesus answered them, My Father worketh hitherto, and I work (John 5:17).

> I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me (John 5:30).

> Then said Jesus unto them, When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am he, and that I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things. And he that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him (John 8:28–29).

B. Adam's Labor

With respect to point two of the biblical covenant, hierarchy,[1] mankind reflects what God is. God promised Himself that He would provide a partner for Adam. Adam needed help. God promised a helper fit (meet) for him. But first, Adam had to complete an assignment. He would learn about work. This work was definitional. He would name the animals. He would define them and their place in the world.

> And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him. And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him (Gen. 2:18–20).

Then God gave Eve to Adam. He immediately named her in terms of her origin. "And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Gen. 2:23).

Before sin, there was a harmony of interests. People were not at war with each other. They were supposed to cooperate. This would make their work more productive.[2] The original goal for mankind has not changed: exercising dominion over the creation (Gen. 1:27–28).[3] This involves the extension of man's authority over nature. This is a cooperative venture.

C. Scattering and Dominion

God thwarted the sin of man at the Tower of Babel by scattering them. This reduced their power. Otherwise, they would have pursued their goal of building a symbolic tower that would reach to heaven.

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1. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1987] 1992), ch. 2. Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory*, 5th ed. (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, [1980] 2010), ch. 3.

2. Gary North, *Sovereignty and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Genesis* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1982] 2012), ch. 10.

3. *Ibid*., ch. 4.

> And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city (Gen. 11:6–8).

This weakened mankind politically and culturally, for it decreased the division of labor. The people were no longer one. Yet this geographical scattering also extended man's influence over nature. Mankind spread out across the face of the earth. Subsequently, international trade made possible the division of labor.[4] There was a re-establishment of unity through diversity: diversity of talents, vision, and programs. The quest for profit brought limited cooperation. But one factor above all others maintained separation: *confession of faith*. Man had been of one tongue, both linguistically and theologically. He had worshipped man. "And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:4). They wanted to make a *name* for themselves: to *define* themselves and their place in the world. God put a stop to this. Their greatest fear became God's negative sanction against them: scattering.

D. Overcoming Individualism

Individualism is rugged. It is rugged because it is inefficient.

The division of labor benefits those who are less rugged. They can achieve together what they could not have achieved individually. The division of labor makes each of the participants more efficient. It also reduces risk for all participants. "But woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up."

The text indicates that more is better than fewer. "And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken." The larger the community of cooperation, the less there is to fear from invaders.

"Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour." They both benefit, which means their output is increased more than two-fold.

The introductory chapters of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) is an application of this passage. Smith shows that a team of men of

4. *Ibid*., ch. 15.

limited skills can cooperate to produce a simple pin. A solitary producer must be highly skilled to make a pin. He can produce few per day. A factory with the proper equipment can produce thousands of pins. Pins become common consumer goods because of mass production and price competition. This is made possible by the specialization involved in the division of labor. Each person concentrates on what he does best.

Conclusion

The division of labor has empowered the weak. It has made all participants more productive. This has increased per capita wealth. What one person cannot accomplish, two can do. It pays them both to do it.

This is not the central fact of Christian economics. Neither is scarcity. Ownership is. God's ownership is the starting point. Adam Smith made the division of labor the starting point. Modern economists make scarcity the starting point. Both of these starting points can be subsumed under the physical limits of nature. This makes them seem morally neutral starting points. They conceal the fundamental fact of Christian economics: *God owns everything*. This fact is anything but neutral.

By subsuming the division of labor under the doctrine of the Trinity, I have made my discussion of the division of labor highly unneutral. That is my task in every volume in this commentary: to make Christian economics unneutral. That which is theocentric is not neutral, and everything in creation is theocentric. Nothing is anthropocentric. Nothing is diabolocentric.

15

WISDOM AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

Better is a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished. For out of prison he cometh to reign; whereas also he that is born in his kingdom becometh poor.

ECCLESIASTES 4:13–14

A. Hierarchy and Social Mobility

Here, the Preacher speaks as a covenant-keeper. He announces that someone is better than someone else. This means that there is a standard of performance. *Wisdom is the decisive differentiating factor between better and worse*. In contrast, autonomous man says that there is no difference between wisdom and foolishness, for death consumes everyone (Eccl. 2:15–17).[1]

The biblical structure of society allows for two-way social mobility. Individuals can rise and fall. There is no security in any high position, and there is also no permanent servitude. Ezekiel warned the kings of Israel: "Thus saith the Lord GOD; Remove the diadem, and take off the crown: this shall not be the same: exalt him that is low, and abase him that is high. I will overturn, overturn, overturn, it: and it shall be no more, until he come whose right it is; and I will give it him" (Ezek. 21:26–27). This was a messianic prophecy regarding the prophecy made by Jacob/Israel in his old age. "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be" (Gen. 49:10).

This prophecy was fulfilled by Jesus Christ. His mother had prophesied before His birth, "He hath shewed strength with his arm;

1. Chapter 3.

he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away" (Luke 1:51–53).[2]

Here, the Preacher speaks of the biblical basis of upward mobility: wisdom. The poor but wise child has better prospects than a king so unwise as to be beyond correction. The meaning of the Hebrew word for "child" is the same as in English. It does not specify age. It generally refers to a young child, but not always. The child in this passage is older: "For out of prison he cometh to reign." The role model here is Joseph, who was in Pharaoh's prison and rose to become second in command in Egypt. He was wise, but his wisdom did not keep him out of prison. On the contrary, it got him into prison.

The Hebrew is obscure. The King James reads: "He that is born in his kingdom becometh poor." The English Standard Version translates the verse differently: "For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor" (v. 14). This is the accepted translation in modern translations. It is not speaking of downward mobility.

For a prisoner to become king was possible in the ancient world only through a military victory or a domestic revolution. Even today, it is unlikely that an ex-convict will lead a nation apart from a military victory or a revolution. The normal career path to supreme authority does not include time behind bars. But the Preacher is making a point. So empowering is wisdom that a wise person has an enormous advantage. So great is this advantage that it can lead to a reversal of status on the scale of a prisoner's becoming king.

The Preacher is not warning unwise kings to become wise. Basic to a lack of wisdom is a refusal to hear counsel. He is warning the rest of us. Better to imitate a wise youth than remain stubbornly closed to advice. *Old age is not a substitute for wisdom*. We presume that wisdom is associated with age, but this text indicates that this rule of thumb is not universal. Wisdom is the key asset—not age, not power.

> Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her (Prov. 3:13–15).[3]

2. Gary North, *Treasure and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Luke*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 1.

3. Gary North, *Wisdom and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Proverbs* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2007] 2012), ch. 9.

> Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding (Prov. 4:7).
>
> For wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it (Prov. 8:11).

Conclusion

If you want riches, cultivate wisdom. If you want power, cultivate wisdom. Wisdom is the royal road to wealth and power. While this passage does not define wisdom, it identifies its benefits. Wisdom is the basis of progress in the life of a covenant-keeper.

16

VOWS AND PROMISES

When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.

ECCLESIASTES 5:4–5

A. Vows as Debt

A vow is a promise made to God. The Preacher warns against taking a vow. A vow cannot lawfully be revised later. It locks in the vow-taker. Although conditions may change, the obligation does not change. The vow is like a burden that must be carried. It places the vow-taker in a position of servanthood.

By committing himself to the performance of some obligation, the vow-taker establishes a binding debt. *A vow is the most binding form of personal debt*. No other debt has comparable authority. A vow to God is binding. The Mosaic law had a detailed set of rules governing vows (Num. 30). It began with this: "If a man vow a vow unto the LORD, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth" (Num. 30:2).[1]

Covenants are established by vows. A marriage is established by a vow before God. People are supposed to take marriage vows seriously. Unless one of the partners dies, either physically or covenantally by committing a biblically specified sin, the marriage vow re-

1. Gary North, *Sanctions and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Numbers*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1997] 2012), ch. 16.

mains binding.[2] The Preacher's warning against taking a vow applies to marriage. Neither party can lawfully be compelled to take such a vow. This applies to arranged marriages. Either party can lawfully veto the decision of the parents. The vow is established by public verbal profession.

Civil government is established by vows. These may be explicit or implicit. This is why there is no right of revolution for an individual acting outside of civil government. Only lower magistrates may lead a revolution, and only for violations by the higher government of the terms of the covenant.

A church covenant is binding. There are only three ways out of a church covenant: by death, letter of transfer, or excommunication. The vow is established by baptism.

B. To Break or Not to Break

A vow is not the same as a promise. It has greater authority. A vow is analogous to a covenant. A promise is analogous to a contract. A promise can lawfully be broken for the sake of covenantal authority.

Israel's most famous lawfully kept promise in the Old Covenant was its fulfilling of its promise to the Gibeonites that they could remain in the land. Although they tricked the Israelites, they had secured the promise. God had told Israel to exterminate all of the Canaanites, but they dared not obey. "But all the princes said unto all the congregation, We have sworn unto them by the LORD God of Israel: now therefore we may not touch them" (Josh 9:19).

The most famous lawful broken promise in Scripture is Solomon's.

> And Adonijah the son of Haggith came to Bath-sheba the mother of Solomon. And she said, Comest thou peaceably? And he said, Peaceably. He said moreover, I have somewhat to say unto thee. And she said, Say on. And he said, Thou knowest that the kingdom was mine, and that all Israel set their faces on me, that I should reign: howbeit the kingdom is turned about, and is become my brother's: for it was his from the LORD. And now I ask one petition of thee, deny me not. And she said unto him, Say on. And he said, Speak, I pray thee, unto Solomon the king, (for he will not say thee nay,) that he give me Abishag the Shunammite to wife. And Bath-sheba said, Well; I will speak for thee unto the king.
>
> Bath-sheba therefore went unto king Solomon, to speak unto him for Adonijah. And the king rose up to meet her, and bowed himself unto her, and sat down on his throne, and caused a seat to be set for the king's

2. Ray R. Sutton, *Second Chance: Biblical Blueprints for Divorce and Remarriage* (Ft. Worth, Texas: Dominion Press, 1987).

> mother; and she sat on his right hand. Then she said, I desire one small petition of thee; I pray thee, say me not nay. And the king said unto her, Ask on, my mother: for I will not say thee nay. And she said, Let Abishag the Shunammite be given to Adonijah thy brother to wife. And king Solomon answered and said unto his mother, And why dost thou ask Abishag the Shunammite for Adonijah? ask for him the kingdom also; for he is mine elder brother; even for him, and for Abiathar the priest, and for Joab the son of Zeruiah.
>
> Then king Solomon sware by the LORD, saying, God do so to me, and more also, if Adonijah have not spoken this word against his own life. Now therefore, as the LORD liveth, which hath established me, and set me on the throne of David my father, and who hath made me an house, as he promised, Adonijah shall be put to death this day. And king Solomon sent by the hand of Benaiah the son of Jehoiada; and he fell upon him that he died (I Kings 2:13–25).

The best explanation for Adonijah's request has to do with inheritance. He thought that by taking as his wife the woman who had slept beside his aged father, he might enhance his position with the people. He had already revolted against David, establishing himself as king. It had taken the intervention of Bathsheba to reverse this. She went to David on his deathbed and asked who should succeed him. He said Solomon (I Kings 1).

Adonijah planned to deceive her. He tested her. He began with a false statement. "Thou knowest that the kingdom was mine, and that all Israel set their faces on me, that I should reign." It was not his by inheritance. It was his by usurpation. All of Israel had not revolted against his usurpation. This did not mean that they were behind his revolt. Would she deny his assertions? If so, she would be unlikely to cooperate. This would cost him nothing. He would not be at risk. But she did not challenge him. He therefore proceeded with the rest of his strategy.

Adonijah was still after the throne. The legal issue here was lawful inheritance. This inheritance was covenantal: family and state. Adonijah's request was another move to capture the state. Solomon had him executed. He broke his promise to his naive mother. His promise had not been a vow before God, as a biblical vow must be.

C. Quid Pro Quo

The vow-taker must consider carefully the cost of performance. What is in this for him? What is the benefit? A vow may be part of an exchange. The vow-taker can promise to do something if he receives a

specific benefit. If he promises God that he will do something specific, he must assume that the specific benefit received came from God. He is obligated to perform as vowed. He owes the service to God. He therefore must regard the benefit received as coming from God.

This acknowledges God as sovereign over history. The vow-taker wants God to intervene in order to achieve his goal. The positive sanction received from God is evidence of the negative sanctions implied by God for non-performance. Neither the Preacher nor the Mosaic law specifies what these negative sanctions are. Presumably, they are double the positive sanctions. The Mosaic law specified double restitution for theft (Ex. 22:4).[3] Refusing to perform the terms of a vow is a form of theft. It is value unpaid for value received.

Conclusion

The Preacher is wary of vows. They impose considerable risk for non-performance. It is easy to let the terms of obligation slide. It is better not to take the vow than to let it slide.

3. Gary North, *Authority and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Exodus* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), Part 3, Tools of Dominion (1990), ch. 43.

17

DELAYED SANCTIONS

> *If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter: for he that is higher than the highest regardeth; and there be higher than they.*
>
> ECCLESIASTES 5:8

This is a covenant-keeper speaking. He understands that God intervenes in history to defend the oppressed. God is active in history. He rules the oppressors. There is hierarchy.[1]

A. Civil Government

The oppression of the poor is here related to civil government. There is perversion of civil justice. This civil focus is consistent with the Mosaic law. As I have argued, *economic oppression in the Mosaic law was always an aspect of civil government*. The Mosaic law was not being enforced by the civil courts. There is no biblical definition of economic oppression in terms of percentages or other numerical indicators.[2] When the civil law is perverted in order to benefit one party or group over another, this is oppression, as defined by the Mosaic law and identified by the prophets.

The person who sees injustice should not be astounded. Why should he be astounded in the first place? Isn't injustice common? The Preacher is concerned with the temptation to become cynical

1. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1987] 1992), ch. 2. Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory*, 5th ed. (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, [1980] 2010), ch. 2.

2. Gary North, *Authority and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Exodus* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), Part 3, *Tools of Dominion* (1990), ch. 48.

about God's sovereign control over the universe. He is heading off the refrain of the atheist: "If God is just, He is not omnipotent. If He is omnipotent, he is not just." The Preacher says that God is in control. He uses a rhetorically powerful phrase to identify God's authority: *higher than the highest*. This refers to the highest court in the land, the final court of appeal.

B. Final Court of Appeal

God is not under the judicial hierarchy. He is above it. He is not unobservant. He is not the distant hypothetical god who was proclaimed by a handful of eighteenth-century deists. He did not wind up the cosmos like a clock eons ago and then retreat into the shadows to see how things would work out.

God observes the affairs of men. He is opposed to oppression. His Bible-revealed law warns against oppression of the weak.

> Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry; And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless (Ex. 22:22–24).[3]

> And when we cried unto the LORD God of our fathers, the LORD heard our voice, and looked on our affliction, and our labour, and our oppression: And the LORD brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders: And he hath brought us into this place, and hath given us this land, even a land that floweth with milk and honey (Deut. 26:7–9).

The humanist proclaims a universe closed to God. If he believes in any god, it is not the God of the Bible, who executes judgment, in time and eternity, in terms of Bible-revealed law. He sees the events of history as independent of any divinely revealed legal code. In such a universe, there can be no meaningful appeal to anything outside of human institutions, let alone outside of history.

This assertion of autonomy transfers the authority to make changes to men who possess power. Civil power is the most important power men can possess, most humanists believe. He who opposes such a view of social causation must look to a higher power to overturn the decisions of corrupt judges, who see no authority above them.

Sometimes the critics of prevailing power look to revolutionary violence as deliverance. Other critics look to free market institutions and

3. *Idem*.

power to overturn the decisions of civil governments. Others look to foreign armies. But all of these are subject to the same sort of corruption.

The person who sees oppression all around him cannot legitimately hope for predictable deliverance unless there is a court of appeal with the power to impose negative sanctions on evildoers. The Preacher says that there is such a court of appeal. God's court is always in session. The fact that He has not yet imposed negative sanctions is not a legitimate reason for believing that His court does not exist.

C. Eternal Standards

There is a standard of justice: biblical law. The Preacher is aware that his readers and listeners can and do perceive the discrepancy between this standard and the injustice around them.

The author was Solomon. Under him, there was little injustice. He had an international reputation for providing justice. So, he wrote these words for all societies at all times. This indicates that God's law is universal. All men understand it. Paul wrote: "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another;)" (Rom. 2:14–15).[4] God's law crosses borders. It extends through time. People reading his words millennia later can still understand injustice when they see it. His affirmation of the existence of a superior court is still as reliable today as it was then.

Men can have legitimate confidence in God's law. They can have legitimate confidence in God's court. They can have legitimate confidence in God's justice. The Preacher is not providing motivation for praying to a local god in his own day. He is affirming the existence of an eternal God who imposes sanctions in terms of a permanent legal code that has authority across borders. It is not that God was above all human courts only in the Preacher's day. It is that God is above all human courts throughout the ages.

Conclusion

This passage is an affirmation of God's law, which includes God's system of sanctions. The fact that, at any point in time, rival human

4. Gary North, *Cooperation and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Romans*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 2.

courts are imposing sanctions in terms of a rival system of law does not mean that God's law and God's sanctions are not operative. The timing of the trial is in God's hands, not man's hands.

18

PURPOSEFUL NATURE

Moreover the profit of the earth is for all: the king himself is served by the field.

ECCLESIASTES 5:9

A. The Earth as a Servant

The Preacher affirms that the earth is a servant. It serves the king. It serves mankind. *If the earth serves man, it means that man is superior to the earth*. His desires are met by the productivity of nature. There is a hierarchy: man > nature.

The Preacher is not making an observation. He is saying that there is justice in this hierarchy. It is not that man exploits nature. He is saying that the land serves man. The Preacher is not an animist. He is not saying that Mother Earth dutifully serves mankind. He is saying that the output of nature legitimately belongs to the human race.

The profit of the earth is for all. This implies purpose. If something is for another, that other is superior. The earth is subordinate to mankind. This is not merely a matter of power. It is a matter of design. In Genesis 1, we read: "And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years: And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so" (vv. 14–15). The heavens were made for man. The very cosmos was purposeful, made to serve a being not yet created. No passage in the Bible is more antithetical to Darwinism.[1]

1. Gary North, *Sovereignty and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Genesis* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1982] 2012), ch. 2.

B. Ownership

"The profit of the earth is for all." This verse could be used by socialists to defend the concept of state ownership. But this does not get to the heart of the problem. There can be various civil governments, each insisting on monopolistic control over a particular geographical territory. This does not solve the problem of resource allocation. The three-part question must be answered by every legal system: *What, how, and for whom?*

The fact that the output of the entire earth is for the benefit of everyone raises issues of production and distribution. It also raises the question of time. The earth survives longer than individuals do. So, future generations have a legal claim on the present generation. Who is to decide what constitutes that claim and what system of allocation honors it? Who is to enforce it? By what standard? By what sanctions?

Private ownership establishes a representative who acts on behalf of future claimants. Civil magistrates also claim this authority in many cases. But a civil magistrate holds his office briefly. His time frame of personal costs and personal benefits is limited. In contrast, a man who owns property recognizes the claims of future heirs. He plans for this. He wants to leave an inheritance. Furthermore, an investor wants his investment to remain profitable. If others perceive that the value of a company's assets is falling, they will sell their shares of ownership, thereby driving the market price of shares even lower. *The future counts heavily in assessing present value*. This is why the owner in a private property system has a greater stake in acting as the agent of future consumers and future owners.

Someone must be in charge of any particular asset. Someone must take responsibility for its use. If it is not under someone's judicial authority, there will be fierce competition for it if its value is significantly greater than the cost of obtaining it. Think of fishermen sailing in the oceans. No one can establish legal title to the fish. The result is open competition outside predictable civil law. The threat of war may impede fishermen. But any international legal code must be enforced through tradition unless there is a one-world civil government.

The text does not specify a system of ownership. The Mosaic law did. The Preacher operated under the Mosaic law. There is no suggestion that the civil government should assert its inherently monopolistic authority over all the land within its jurisdiction. He said only that the earth in general is for all mankind in general.

Conclusion

Nature is not impersonal. It is highly personal. It is not self-conscious. It is nevertheless purposeful. This is because it was created by a personal God to serve man, who is the image of God, both individually and corporately.

Ownership is personal. It is also hierarchical. Men serve God. Nature serves men. *The authority that men exercise over nature rests on the authority that God exercises over men*. This biblical hierarchy of authority is the basis of biblical ownership. There is no hint anywhere in the Bible that the civil government should exercise bureaucratic authority over nature on behalf of God.

19

INSATIABLE DISCONTENT

He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity. When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good is there to the owners thereof, saving the beholding of them with their eyes? The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep. There is a sore evil which I have seen under the sun, namely, riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt. But those riches perish by evil travail: and he begetteth a son, and there is nothing in his hand. As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand. And this also is a sore evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?

ECCLESIASTES 5:10–16

This is a lengthy passage. It has one theme: the vanity of riches. *This is the most comprehensive critique of the pursuit of wealth found in the Old Testament*.

A. Insatiability

C. S. Lewis wrote that torture would be to eat food that makes you hungry. His point was that one of the joys of desire is that it can be fulfilled. If it could not be fulfilled, it would be a curse.

Addiction is marked by an insatiable desire to consume more. The individual is trapped by a lust to consume. This addiction can apply to different substances or practices, depending on the individual.

The Preacher identifies *the addiction to more*. This addiction is not discriminating. Silver is a sign of this addiction, but the addiction is to abundance in general.

Elsewhere, I have summarized the confession of faith of Mammonites: "More for me in history." This religion attracts followers in every generation and across all geographical borders. Its followers are discontented. Jesus identified this addiction as the most widespread alternative to faith in God.

> No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they (Matt. 6:24–26)?[1]

The Apostle Paul described the outlook of Mammonism's rival religion: Christianity.

> But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness (I Tim. 6:6–11).[2]

Paul was echoing the words of the Preacher.

B. The Economic Function of Discontent

One of the familiar teachings of economic science is this: "Men's desires are infinite. Resources are finite." If nothing else, time is limited. We are mortal. The disparity between wants and resources is the origin of scarcity. Scarcity is manifested in price. At zero price, there is greater demand than supply.

1. Scarcity and Priorities

Scarcity mandates priorities. What are we willing to pay for first? Second? Third? We cannot afford to purchase everything, but we can

1. Gary North, *Priorities and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Matthew*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 14.

2. Gary North, *Hierarchy and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on First Timothy*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2001] 2012), ch. 10.

afford to buy more when we become more productive. If I want more, and if I resort neither to stealing nor voting to enrich myself, then I must increase my productivity in order to purchase goods that I regard as lower on my scale of priorities, i.e., my scale of values.

Ludwig von Mises placed discontentment the center of his economic theory. In *Human Action*, his magnum opus, he wrote that man is distinguished from God by means of discontent.

> Scholastic philosophers and theologians and likewise Theists and Deists of the Age of Reason conceived an absolute and perfect being, unchangeable, omnipotent, and omniscient, and yet planning and acting, aiming at ends and employing means for the attainment of these ends. But action can only be imputed to a discontented being, and repeated action only to a being who lacks the power to remove his uneasiness once and for all at one stroke. An acting being is discontented and therefore not almighty. If he were contented, he would not act, and if he were almighty, he would have long since radically removed his discontent.[3]

The Preacher presents discontentment as a sin. Why? Because it is inherently insatiable. This form of discontentment cannot be satisfied. It always wants more.

Economists of all persuasions see the summum bonum of an economy as economic growth. It is seen as the universal cure-all. A growing number of people are enabled to satisfy their desires because of economic growth.

2. The Theoretical Problem of Addiction

This assumes that the problem of addiction does not exist. If someone said that greater efficiency in the production of heroin or cocaine would be a benefit to individual addicts and society in general, because the price of the substance would fall, would you agree? I would not. The problem is not a lack of supply; rather, it is the short-sighted, present-oriented nature of demand. *Where addiction exists, the goal should be the reduction of demand, not an increase in supply*.

To identify an addiction, we must have standards of evaluation. These standards are moral. "Addiction is bad." The modern economist denies that morality has anything to do with economic science. Economic science is said to be value-free. But if it is, then economists should not recommend economic policies. They should not proclaim the benefits of either efficiency or economic growth. But they do.

3. Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1949), p. 69.

Economists draw conclusions that they say favor economic growth. This is inconsistent with the premise of moral neutrality.[4]

3. The Pursuit of Riches

The Bible acknowledges the legitimacy of economic growth, for it reduces poverty, which the Bible views as a curse to be overcome. But the Bible does not recommend the pursuit of riches. Solomon wrote of wealth and poverty, "Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain" (Prov. 30:8–9).[5]

Vilfredo Pareto in 1897 published his discovery of the 20-80 distribution of capital in modern society. Twenty percent of the population owns 80% of the capital. This unequal distribution of capital has been found in all societies. There are no exceptions. To raise a nation's masses out of poverty, society must therefore allow a minority of rich people to become very rich. A fifth of the population must become comparatively rich, and 4%[6] of the population very rich. About 1% become super-rich. This is the inescapable cost of economic growth in every society.

4. Accumulation as Addiction

The Preacher identifies the problem: insatiability for personal wealth. It is vanity. It is vanity because it is autonomous. It does not put God at the center. Men seek to accumulate goods for themselves. Jesus said this is foolishness.

> And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul

4. Gary North, *Sovereignty and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Genesis* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1982] 2012), ch. 5; Gary North, *Authority and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Exodus* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), Part 3, *Tools of Dominion* (1990), Appendix H.

5. Gary North, *Wisdom and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Proverbs* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2007] 2012), ch. 85.

6. That is, 20% of 20%.

> shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God. And he said unto his disciples, Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat; neither for the body, what ye shall put on. The life is more than meat, and the body is more than raiment (Luke 12:16–23).[7]

These words are among the Bible's most difficult ethical injunctions to implement. People who would not be tempted to violate any of the Ten Commandments have difficulty believing these words. If they did truly believe them, they would not worry about money. But they do.

There is nothing wrong with barns. Barns store food, and food benefits the poor. Barns make possible laying up food in the harvest for sale and distribution in the months just before the next harvest, when the supply of food is low. The ethical issue here is motivation. "And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry." His dream was to be contented. He never achieved his dream. Time ran out that night.

C. Increased Expenses

The Preacher indicates that increased wealth increases costs. "When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good is there to the owners thereof, saving the beholding of them with their eyes?" *The rich man increases his level of responsibility*. He must surround himself with people to carry out his plans.

Rich men also attract hangers-on. These are people who want hand-outs. They want to attend the rich man's parties. They want to become part of his entourage. These people are difficult to escape or get rid of. They congregate where the rich man visits. This is one reason why very rich people live in houses that are remote from a highway. They have gates around their property. They employ screeners. But screeners must be paid for.

Related to hangers-on are visionaries who want the rich man to fund their projects. They paint glowing pictures of all that can be accomplished. Rich men often listen to these dreamers. They fund their visions. Rarely do these visions succeed, which is true of all new ventures. There is a long line of replacement visionaries, each with a story to tell and a dream to be achieved.

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7. Gary North, *Treasure and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Luke*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 25.

D. Responsibility and Worry

"The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep." I suggest that the difference between these sleep patterns has to do with the level of personal responsibility. A laboring man does his job as assigned, goes home, has a meal, and sleeps. He has no further responsibility to his employer. His degree of responsibility is limited. In contrast, the owner of a company has many employers to keep contented: customers. They can change their minds at any time. They ask: "What have you done for me lately? And what do you intend to do for me next week? I intend to shop around." He also has many employees to keep contented.

A rich man must stay ahead of the competition if he is to increase his wealth, or even preserve it. He must manage his wealth in a world of uncertainty.[8] He could lose his money by a bad investment or an unexpected new source of competition. Possessing more money, he has more responsibility. Jesus said, "And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more" (Luke 12:47–48).[9] This responsibility troubles his sleep.

The Preacher says, "There is a sore evil which I have seen under the sun, namely, riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt." He has already explained why riches kept for owners hurt their owners. First, the owners are not satisfied. Second, their production costs rise. Third, their sleep fades.

E. Nothing to Show for His Labor

"But those riches perish by evil travail: and he begetteth a son, and there is nothing in his hand." The Hebrew words translated as "evil travail" can also be translated as "adverse business." The context of these words indicates that the latter is a better translation. His wealth has disappeared. His heir will not inherit, because there is nothing left to inherit. This family's story is the story of rags to riches to rags.

The accumulator loses his riches. But he could not have retained

8. Mises, *Human Action*, ch. 6.
9. North, *Treasure and Dominion*, ch. 28.

ownership anyway. "As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand. And this also is a sore evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind." The correct answer to the old question, "How much did he leave behind?" is clear to the Preacher: "All of it!"

The Preacher here speaks of a man's legacy in terms of the assumption of personal autonomy. A man has labored to accumulate riches. If he dies before this legacy erodes away, he still cannot benefit personally. *The assumption of autonomy leads to a conclusion: the individual works for himself.* But he will die just as he arrived: naked. The clothing he put on is left behind with the body it clothed. What remains of the person who accumulated this wealth? On the assumption of autonomy, nothing.

The Preacher is speaking of a specific form of wealth: "riches kept for the owners thereof." The accumulator labored in vain, for when he departed, the riches remained behind. To be used by whom? Someone else. For what purposes? The heir's.

If this wealth does somehow achieve much good, what is that to the departed? He will not know. He will not rejoice. He will not impute value to the outcome of his labor. Any value that it may retain will be imputed by the heirs and by market participants.

In an estate sale, the assets are auctioned off, piece by piece, to the highest bidders. The owner in his lifetime can offer no assured evaluation of his estate's future value. He offers this representatively, on behalf of future decisions of the buyers. His evaluation will carry no weight after he is dead. That which is past carries weight only representatively. "What would the founder have thought?" At an estate sale, nobody cares. High bids win, asset by asset, with no consideration of the opinions of the deceased. Such is the fate of everyone's legacy, given the assumption of human autonomy.

Conclusion

The Preacher warns that discontent, when applied to money or goods, is vanity. It is wasteful. It is not fulfilling. Yet there is no suggestion in the Bible that the accumulation of tools is inherently vain. The questions are: "What is the accumulator's motivation for accumulating tools? For himself as an autonomous agent or as God's steward?" The former is vanity. The latter motivation is not dealt with here. It is dealt with in the last verses of the book. "Let us hear the conclusion

of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Eccl. 12:13–14).[10]

All people are discontented. This is a consequence of sin. Men's desires far outstrip their wealth. The more they own, the more they want. They soon get used to the pleasure and satisfaction of new possessions.[11] To restore their lost satisfaction, they seek to accumulate even more. The treadmill of accumulation has no end and offers no rest. They incarnate the most famous lyric of the supremely recognizable song of the rock and roll era: "I can't get no satisfaction. I can't get no satisfaction. 'Cause I've tried. And I've tried. And I've tried. And I've tried." [12]

10. Chapter 45.

11. In the field of economics known as behavioral economics, this phenomenon is called the hedonic ratchet. Only the transition out of extreme poverty offers a permanent increase in personal satisfaction. By God's grace, this phenomenon works both ways. People who have experienced a major loss soon adjust. Their former level of satisfaction returns.

12. Comparatively few people have ever deciphered the lyrics of the loud, muddled, and most memorable song that catapulted Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones to worldwide fame in 1965. He made a fortune with this anti-consumption song. He has never ceased trying to get satisfied. In their mid-sixties in 2006–7, the Rolling Stones had a year-long worldwide tour that grossed an estimated $437 million, when gold was around $625 an ounce.

20

IN PRAISE OF CONSUMPTION

> *Behold that which I have seen: it is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him: for it is his portion. Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God. For he shall not much remember the days of his life; because God answereth him in the joy of his heart.*
>
> ECCLESIASTES 5:18–20

He is speaking as a covenant-keeper. How do we know? Because he identifies as a blessing a man's ability to rejoice in his labor. In his positioning as an autonomous man, he always identifies labor as vanity, chasing after wind. Not here. In an earlier passage, he favorably compares the lifestyle of the laboring man to that of a rich man. "The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much," in contrast to the rich producer: "the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep" (Eccl. 5:12).[1] In this passage, the rich man possesses enough wealth so that he does not eat little, unless he is on a diet. The Preacher twice says that such a condition is the gift of God: "Every man also to whom God hath given riches" and "God answereth him in the joy of his heart." This is not the outlook of autonomy.

The Preacher speaks only of the present: "For he shall not much remember the days of his life; because God answereth him in the joy of his heart." The person who takes his advice and celebrates the present will not dwell on the past. "For he shall not much remember the days of his life; because God answereth him in the joy of his heart."

He has recommended this consumption-affirming lifestyle previ-

1. Chapter 19.

ously. "There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God" (Eccl. 2:24).[2] "And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God" (Eccl. 3:13).[3]

The kingdom of God is to be enjoyed in the present. The kingdom grows through present sacrifices, another word for thrift. Thrift funds the creation of tools. Without tools, there is no advance. Peter and the disciples fished with nets. Those nets allowed a great catch.

> Now when he had left speaking, he said unto Simon, Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught. And Simon answering said unto him, Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net. And when they had this done, they inclosed a great multitude of fishes: and their net brake. And they beckoned unto their partners, which were in the other ship, that they should come and help them. And they came, and filled both the ships, so that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord. For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the draught of the fishes which they had taken: And so was also James, and John, the sons of Zebedee, which were partners with Simon. And Jesus said unto Simon, Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men (Luke 5:4–10).

If they had spent more on additional nets, they would have caught more fish. Jesus was making a point: better to bring men the gospel than to catch lots of fish. But had they possessed additional nets and boats, the point would have been that much more memorable. We are limited by a lack of tools. We can always use better tools. They must be paid for.

Conclusion

The Bible does not teach asceticism. The Preacher made this clear. He repeatedly told his readers that they should enjoy the comforts of success. These are God's gift to men. Men are not to despise God's gifts. But there is still the question of wisdom in allocating these gifts. Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines (I Kings 11:3). There were better uses for his money and time.

2. Chapter 5.
3. Chapter 8.

21

WHEN A STRANGER INHERITS

> *There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is common among men: A man to whom God hath given riches, wealth, and honour, so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it: this is vanity, and it is an evil disease.*
>
> ECCLESIASTES 6:1–2

The Preacher returns to a familiar theme in his book: inheritance. This means death. Death is the inescapable barrier to meaningful accumulation, he argues. No matter how much wealth a person accumulates, he will not be able to enjoy it for long. No matter how much honor is imputed to him by those around him—those whose opinions matter in society—it will not last.

A. The Issue is Death

Why do I think the issue here is death? First, the problem he mentions is universal: "common among men." Second, it applies to rich men, not just common people. Third, it has to do with power: "God giveth him not power to eat thereof." The lack of what kind of power keeps a rich man from eating his own food? I can think of only two things: lack of life or lack of wealth. He either dies or loses his wealth. Fourth, "a stranger eateth it." This is the difficult case.

If the issue here is not death, then it is the loss of wealth. How might a rich man lose his money? Military conquest, but this is not common. Then what about bad business ventures? This is possible. But how common is this? Not very. Most people do not own businesses. Most people keep most of what they possess most of the time. This is especially true in a predominately agricultural society. A man

dies on the farm he was born on, if he inherited the farm from his father.[1] The Preacher is dealing with a problem that is universal. It applies to common people, too.

Even if the issue he is dealing with is not death, but rather the loss of a man's wealth due to poor business dealings, this is still the problem of inheritance. He leaves nothing to his heirs. The Preacher has already mentioned this. "There is a sore evil which I have seen under the sun, namely, riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt. But those riches perish by evil travail: and he begetteth a son, and there is nothing in his hand" (Eccl. 5:13–14).[2] The heirs of a dead man's legacy will be strangers. So, the Preacher's warning here could be related to the loss of his goods in his lifetime. Given his assessments that follow, I think it is more likely that his concern in this passage is death.

> If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also that he have no burial; I say, that an untimely birth is better than he. For he cometh in with vanity, and departeth in darkness, and his name shall be covered with darkness. Moreover he hath not seen the sun, nor known any thing: this hath more rest than the other. Yea, though he live a thousand years twice told, yet hath he seen no good: do not all go to one place? All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled. For what hath the wise more than the fool? what hath the poor, that knoweth to walk before the living (Eccl. 6:3–8)?

He asks rhetorically, "do not all go to one place?" That has to be the grave. He is speaking about eating: "All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled." He does not mean that we labor only for food. He also mentions honor. Furthermore, the early sections of this book deal with his experiment: to taste all of life. Everything came out the same: vanity. "For what hath the wise more than the fool? what hath the poor, that knoweth to walk before the living." It all comes down to this: the grave. It all goes down to this, too.

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1. This has not been true in the United States, but the United States is arguably the most mobile (and rootless) large nation in history. From the first generation of Puritans in the seventeenth century, Americans moved to better land. Sumner Chilton Powell, *Puritan Village: The Formation of a New England Town* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1963).

2. Chapter 19.

B. The Stranger

A stranger eats the rich man's food. The Hebrew word translated here as "stranger" is *nok-ree*. This referred to a foreigner who refused to covenant with God. He was outside the faith confessionally. He was uncircumcised. He had no part in the congregation of the Lord. It was legal to lend to him at interest in a charitable loan (Deut. 23:20).[3] If this is who the Preacher has in mind, then the inheritance is transferred either to a foreign conqueror or else to a successful foreign businessman living inside Israel. Neither of these events would have been common in Israel. Surely, they were not universal features of life outside of Israel in the Preacher's day. They have been non-existent in the world since the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

I think the stranger who eats the rich man's food is his son. A man thinks he knows his own son, but no man can know the heart of another. No one knows what his son will do with his inheritance. He may act as a stranger acts. This is a common fear in history. The prodigal son of Jesus' parable is a rarity: one who inherits early, squanders the inheritance, and returns unto his father's house (Luke 15:11–21).[4]

A rich man is concerned about the heir. A son may squander his father's posthumous legacy. This concern has been universal in history, among rich men and poor men alike. The Preacher is saying that the concern of the successful man is the same as the concern of the common man: the *posthumous wasting* of all that he strived for in life. The man worked to eat, meaning that he worked to be successful—in modern American slang, "to know where his next meal is coming from." He achieved his goal. He did not have to worry about "putting food on the table." Yet he knows that his inheritance may fall into the hand of a confessional stranger.

C. So What?

If a man lives only to eat, what does it matter what happens to his wealth after he dies? Who cares? The Preacher cares because he knows what most men know: we do not work hard only to eat. We work hard to leave a legacy of some kind. If a man's legacy is dissipated in one generation, what did all his work accomplish? What if the inheritance is put to worthless uses? This is the Preacher's concern. "For who

3. Gary North, *Inheritance and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1999] 2012), ch. 56.

4. Gary North, *Treasure and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Luke*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 37.

knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun" (Eccl. 6:12)?[5]

The accumulator will die. So will the man who leaves no visible legacy. Are their legacies really the same? In a world of pure autonomy, the answer is yes. The only thing that matters for a purely autonomous man is his personal use of whatever it is that he accumulates. Yet even self-proclaimed autonomous men seek honor. They want to be remembered. Why? What does it matter if future autonomous people honor a dead man's efforts? He cannot enjoy the acclaim. Also, to the extent that his sense of success depends on future generations' retroactive imputation of honor, he is not autonomous. He is dependent on prevailing future standards, future events, and future people he cannot control. *This is a denial of autonomy*. It is an affirmation of dependence on others.

So, maintaining the legacy matters. If a man's legacy is maintained, his work today is meaningful. The Preacher believed this. How do we know what he believed? Because he told us what the basis of meaningless work is: a squandered inheritance. He did not argue that an inheritance maintained down through the generations is equally meaningless as an inheritance squandered by the heir or maintained by a stranger. This implies that a legacy maintained or even expanded by confessionally orthodox heirs is meaningful. It is the threat of inheritance by a stranger that makes a man's work vanity. An autonomous man should not care. But he does care. Hence, he does not really regard himself as autonomous.

Conclusion

The Preacher writes of a common fear: *inheritance by someone who does not share the confession of the accumulator*. If a rich man cannot buy a solution to this problem, then no one can. The problem cannot be solved through exchange in a free market or in any other institutional arrangement. The problem is common because the lack of a solution is universal.

If a man's wealth is inherited by a confessional stranger, then his efforts were in vain. This is the Preacher's concern. The rich man eats well, but life is more than eating well. If life were merely eating and drinking, then death would end all of our concerns. It would not mat-

5. Chapter 19.

ter one way or the other who eats and drinks with the wealth we leave behind. This concern over a stranger's inheritance has meaning only in a world in which life is more than eating and drinking. *The meaning of our efforts has to do with covenantal inheritance in the broadest sense. This is the primary message of Ecclesiastes*. It is a message conveyed in a subtle way. It requires that the reader think carefully about what he reads.

22

AUTONOMY VS. ECONOMIC GROWTH

All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled. For what hath the wise more than the fool? what hath the poor, that knoweth to walk before the living? Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire: this is also vanity and vexation of spirit That which hath been is named already, and it is known that it is man: neither may he contend with him that is mightier than he. Seeing there be many things that increase vanity, what is man the better? For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?

ECCLESIASTES 6:7–12

A. The Philosophy of Autonomy

In developing his case against the philosophy of human autonomy, the Preacher here uses a metaphor of man's journey through life: eating. He knows, as we know, that men work to do far more than eat, yet he speaks as though man is merely an organism of consumption. The mouth is his metaphor of man's consumption. Men eat and are soon hungry. "The appetite is not filled." They must constantly feed themselves. More than once a day, they must shove food into their mouths. There is no permanent contentment. If they cease to eat, they will die of starvation. They are reminded daily of their dependence on food and therefore their dependance on labor. "He that laboureth laboureth for himself; for his mouth craveth it of him" (Prov. 16:36).

He returns to the theme of the vanity of equality. The fool possesses as many things of value as the wise man. "For what hath the wise more than the fool?" He has wisdom, but how does this make his life different? He, too, must fill his mouth daily. He has to work to

consume. He is trapped on the same treadmill as the fool. The basics of their lives are the same. Wisdom counts for nothing.

This conclusion is contrary to the Book of Proverbs, where wisdom is the supreme good. "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding" (Prov. 4:7). Wisdom is the true source of happiness. "Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding" (Prov. 3:13). Therefore, we must regard the Preacher's statement as part of his critique of the logic of autonomy. *Wisdom rejects autonomy*. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Prov. 1:7).

The philosophy of autonomy sees nothing superior to man. Man is not subordinate to a higher authority. So, he must derive meaning from himself. The Preacher is exploring answers to this question: "What is the essence of autonomous man's condition?" Here, speaking on behalf of the philosophy of autonomy, he says that the wise man and the fool are equally men. To exist as a man is sufficient to establish a man's authority. There is no higher standard. In the world of human autonomy, who has the authority to impute (assess and declare) superiority to a wise man over a fool? The wise man may like to think that he possesses this authority, but where is the proof? What is the basis of his claim? Not his humanity as such. A fool possesses humanity. A wise man is as trapped by dependence on food as a fool . . . or a beast. His autonomy is constrained by his need to eat. It is also constrained by death, as the Preacher noted in the previous passage: "Yea, though he live a thousand years twice told, yet hath he seen no good: do not all go to one place"(v. 6). He makes this same conclusion repeatedly.[1] Death swallows meaning as surely as men swallow food. *Death is the great equalizer: the equality of nothing.*

Similarly with the poor man. "What hath the poor, that knoweth to walk before the living?" The poor man has nothing of value other than his ability to survive, to "walk before the living." But he is a dead man walking. His advantage over the dead will end soon enough.

Then one way of life is as good as another . . . or as bad. It is all vanity. Conclusion: "Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire: this is also vanity and vexation of spirit." In other words, be content with what you possess or can easily possess. This is so much easier than striving after more. The wandering of desire is insatiable.

1. Ecclesiastes 2:15–17; 3:19–20.

If nothing matters, because everything is vanity, then a wise man seeks to buy vanity at the lowest possible price. Do not seek wisdom or wealth. To do so is the wandering of desire. What is the point? You are a dead man eating. You are a dead man walking. You might as well limit your goals. This is so much more pleasant.

> Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity. For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool. Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit (Eccl. 2:15–17).[2]

B. Reduced Economic Growth

The philosophy of autonomy undermines the impetus for economic growth. If all of life's results are equal, then what is the point of sacrificing in the present for the sake of the future? "Seeing there be many things that increase vanity, what is man the better? For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun"(vv. 11–12). The heirs will inherit, and what they will do with the inheritance is uncertain. Only death is certain. *The philosophy of autonomy, when pursued to its logical conclusion—the equality of vanity and death—is intensely present-oriented.*

Present-orientation, or what Ludwig von Mises called high time preference, leads to high interest rates.[3] People are not induced to save unless they are offered high rates of interest by borrowers. High rates of interest reduce the number of profitable projects. Profits are what remain after all expenses. Interest rates are an expense. People who care little about the future are willing to pay high interest rates in order to consume now. The competition for funds in a present-oriented society favors consumption loans at the expense of production loans. This reduces economic growth. People get what they pay for: present consumption at the expense of greater future consumption.

Wherever the philosophy of autonomy is both understood and widely pursued, it leads to stagnation. It leads to consumption rather than economic growth. The man who dreams of wealth without sacrifice in the pres-

2. Chapter 3.

3. Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1949), ch. 19.

ent believes in a fantasy. Isaiah described this outlook two centuries later. "Come ye, say they, I will fetch wine, and we will fill ourselves with strong drink; and to morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant" (Isa. 56:12).

Conclusion

The Preacher continues his exploration of the implications of the philosophy of human autonomy. He concludes that the wise man has no advantage over the fool. The poor man is wiser than the rich man, because he does not sacrifice in the present in order to live the same kind of life that the rich man leads: a life of vanity. The poor man pays so much less to live in vain. This shows wisdom on his part, assuming that wisdom offers an advantage, which it does not, according to the Preacher's assessment of the philosophy of human autonomy.

23

AUTONOMY AND SORROW

A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart. Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

ECCLESIASTES 7:1–4

A. Reputation After Death

In the preceding section, the Preacher made the case against the philosophy of autonomy by arguing that, in terms of this philosophy, death swallows up everything. Nothing has meaning, because death has no meaning and is the great equalizer.

Death mandates inheritance. It is folly to labor long and hard to build up an inheritance that will be appropriated by people of uncertain character. It makes no sense.

In this passage, he abandons the argument of the previous section. He does so in the name of autonomy. He fully understands that those who defend the philosophy of autonomy will resist the conclusions that he had previously drawn from its presuppositions. These conclusions are just too pessimistic for the average man, who will search for an alternative. The Preacher here discusses one hoped-for alternative: a good reputation. Surely, this survives one's death. Surely, this is worth sacrificing for. The Preacher examines this possibility. "A good name is better than precious ointment." But why is this the case? He does not say. The philosophy of autonomy offers no reason to believe this, so he merely states it as a fact. He then explores its implications.

B. The Economics of a Good Name

If a good name is worth having because it survives death, how does someone obtain it? After all, we do not get something for nothing.

Most people assume that a good name cannot be purchased with money in a marketplace. This is incorrect. In the early twentieth century, a new profession arose: public relations. It made scientific what civil rulers had learned centuries before, most notably in Machiavelli's book, *The Prince*: public opinion can be manipulated. Rich men and corporations began to hire specialists in developing and promoting a good name. These specialists wrote favorable news reports and persuaded newspapers to run them as if they were neutral feature articles. They used many other sophisticated techniques.[1] Most people would say that a good name attained through public relations is ersatz: fool's gold, not real gold. But who is to say? A good name is always conferred, meaning imputed. If those doing the conferring are deceived, or at least manipulated, what does this matter to the beneficiary? He gains the benefit.

A good name is always purchased. This purchase involves forfeiting something of value in exchange for obtaining a good name. This fact is not widely understood. Generally, people assume that a person's high integrity cannot be purchased. They are incorrect. Integrity has a price: *forfeited income*. A good name implies that a person has sacrificed something of value to obtain it. It is true that you do not buy integrity with your excess earnings, although you can buy the public's perception of integrity. Here is how you buy integrity: avoid excess earnings, which are taxable, by adhering to your principles. The economic outcome is the same as if someone had bought integrity in a market: *less wealth*. What is inescapable is this exchange: *integrity for money*.

Integrity is not directly marketable, but it is marketable indirectly. You can profit from it. A person with a good reputation for repaying debt can borrow money at a lower rate of interest than a man with a bad reputation for repaying debt. "The wicked borroweth, and payeth not again: but the righteous sheweth mercy, and giveth" (Psalm 37:21).[2] A person with a good reputation can gain cooperation from

1. The most famous of these specialists was the nephew of the psychologist Sigmund Freud, Edward Bernays (1891–1995). He wrote many books on his techniques. The other founder was Ivy Lee. Scott Cutlip, *The Unseen Power: Public Relations. A History* (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Eichelbaum Associates, 1994).

2. Gary North, *Confidence and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Psalms* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), ch. 6.

others at a low price. There is less risk in dealing with him. As we say, "His reputation precedes him." To gain a reputation for integrity, a person sacrifices marketable wealth in the present. To obtain what? His future reputation. Again, his reputation will precede him. It will open doors. It will gain him respect.

Is this autonomy? No, it is dependence. Others must impute to him his good reputation. These others must be "the right sort of people." But how do they obtain their reputations for being the right sort of people? From others? This merely pushes the question out another step. From themselves? Then by what authority?[3] By what standard?[4] With what sanctions?[5] With what long-term impact?[6]

The Preacher says that a good name is a very good thing. But why is this true? Because of what it can do for you in the future. Why is it better than precious ointment? Because precious ointment is used only once and is gone. A good reputation is permanent. Well, not quite. It is as permanent as the reputations of those who impute a good name. It is as permanent as the memories of those who impute a good name. It is as permanent as the ability of those who impute a good name to impose sanctions that uphold their judgment. But there is one thing a good name is not: autonomous.

C. The Day of Death

The Preacher once again returns to the theme of death. The day of death is better than the day of one's birth. Why should this be true? Because death puts an end to responsibility, to sacrifice in the present, and to striving after wind. On that day, a good name is neither here nor there. This is because the deceased is no longer here.

So, that which is better than precious ointment is lost forever to the autonomous man on the day of his death. If anything, this is his day of precious ointment. Jesus said: "For in that she hath poured this ointment on my body, she did it for my burial" (Matt. 26:12). Conclusion: "It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart."

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3. Part two of the biblical covenant. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1987] 1992), ch. 2. Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory*, 5th ed. (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, [1980] 2010), ch. 2.

4. Part three of the biblical covenant. *Ibid*., ch. 3.

5. Point four of the biblical covenant. *Ibid*., ch. 4.

6. Point five of the biblical covenant. *Ibid*., ch. 5.

Death ends both production and consumption. It ends vanity. There is no more striving after wind. For autonomous man, this is his day of deliverance. But, as a day of deliverance, it is also a day of meaninglessness. Death is impersonal. It imputes nothing. It is also supreme. It overcomes all imputation. The good reputation, the bad reputation, the absence of reputation: death swallows all.

What is the logical implication of all this? The Preacher tells us: "It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart." Visiting a house of mourning prepares us for the inescapable reality of death. Death is not autonomous man's crowning achievement. Death is the annulment of all achievement. Death ratifies nothing. Get used to it, the Preacher says. "The living will lay it to his heart." The Preacher was highly skilled in laying such things on his heart, as his book reveals.

"Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better." Why is this the case? Because death is sorrowful. To contemplate the triumph of death is a sorrowful activity, but it is a realistic one. Samuel Johnson, the eighteenth-century literary critic who is famous today only because of James Boswell's multi-volume biography of him, once quipped to Boswell: "Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." He thought a great deal about death, and the thought horrified him, despite his Christianity.[7]

For autonomous man, death is the end of all that has meaning. Nothing has meaning, because of death. For the modern cosmic evolutionist, who believes that everything will end with the heat death of the universe—absolute zero—however distant in time, impersonal death swallows up meaning as surely as it did for the Preacher's autonomous man.[8] This is a sorrowful thought. Most men prefer not to think about it, just as David Hume, a believer that death ends everything, preferred not to think about it.

Conclusion

The Preacher did not say that the transition from life to death is easy. It is sorrowful. If death is the final end of man, then this sorrow spreads its tentacles across the living. *Sorrow is superior to laughter*

7. *Mortality Quotes: The Samuel Johnson Sound Bite Page.*

8. Gary North, *Is the World Running Down? Crisis in the Christian Worldview* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1988), ch. 2.

because death is not a laughing matter. The more realistic the heart, the better the heart, he says. For the autonomous man, realism produces sorrow.

The deliverance from this death-induced sorrow was announced by Jesus Christ. "The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). Paul told us why sorrow is not to be preferred to laughter.

> So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord (I Cor. 15:54–58).[9]

Both Jesus and Paul rejected the philosophy of autonomy. So did the Preacher.

9. Gary North, *Judgment and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on First Corinthians*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2001] 2012), ch. 16.

24

OPPRESSION AND BRIBERY

Surely oppression maketh a wise man mad; and a gift destroyeth the heart.

ECCLESIASTES 7:7

A. The Meaning of Oppression

I have argued ever since 1990 that the Mosaic law did not define oppression exclusively in economic terms. The Mosaic law did not set forth objective economic criteria for identifying oppression.[1] It did identify oppression as a great evil.

The context of the word sometimes points to a violation of civil law, always with the cooperation of judges. This verse rests on such a view of oppression. The Preacher had previously written: "If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter: for he that is higher than the highest regardeth; and there be higher than they" (Eccl. 5:8).[2] The context was the perversion of justice—a legal context.

Here, he connects oppression with gifts. The Hebrew word translated here as "gift" refers to a donation. Usually, the word's context indicates a gift to God: a sacrifice.[3] It is also used as an offering to an idol.[4] It is not the other Hebrew word that is translated as "gift," whose frequent context is bribery. So, grammar does not confirm that the context here is bribery. But it does not deny it, either.

Consider the context. First, why would an offering to God destroy

1. Gary North, *Authority and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Exodus* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), Part 3, *Tools of Dominion* (1990), ch. 48.
2. Chapter 17.
3. Exodus 28:38; Leviticus 23:38; Numbers 18:6–7, 29.
4. Ezekiel 20:26, 31.

the heart? It wouldn't. Second, the context does not indicate idolatrous worship. The context is oppression. By a process of elimination, the context indicates bribery.

B. Oppression by the Wise

A wise man is a man who understands God's law. Such a man possesses wisdom and understanding. David had told this to Solomon.

> And David said to Solomon, My son, as for me, it was in my mind to build an house unto the name of the LORD my God: But the word of the LORD came to me, saying, Thou hast shed blood abundantly, and hast made great wars: thou shalt not build an house unto my name, because thou hast shed much blood upon the earth in my sight. Behold, a son shall be born to thee, who shall be a man of rest; and I will give him rest from all his enemies round about: for his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quietness unto Israel in his days. He shall build an house for my name; and he shall be my son, and I will be his father; and I will establish the throne of his kingdom over Israel for ever. Now, my son, the LORD be with thee; and prosper thou, and build the house of the LORD thy God, as he hath said of thee. Only the LORD give thee wisdom and understanding, and give thee charge concerning Israel, that thou mayest keep the law of the LORD thy God. Then shalt thou prosper, if thou takest heed to fulfil the statutes and judgments which the LORD charged Moses with concerning Israel: be strong, and of good courage; dread not, nor be dismayed (I Chron. 22:7–13).

A wise man therefore understands the great evil of oppression, for the Mosaic law repeatedly identifies oppression as a sin. The word "oppression" here could refer to economic oppression, but then the reference to the gift would make no sense. Why would a private party oppressor receive a gift? He wouldn't. A corrupt judge would.

The context indicates that a wise man is sitting as a judge. He has received a bribe to persuade him to impose a decision that violates biblical law. He knows that this is a corrupt bargain, but he nevertheless accepts the gift. In a courtroom setting, this destroys the heart. Why? Because the wise judge knows this transaction is wrong.

The Preacher also says that this transaction will make him mad. The Hebrew word here indicates madness, not anger.[5] It is madness in

5. "And he changed his behaviour before them, and feigned himself mad in their hands, and scrabbled on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle fall down upon his beard" (I Sam. 21:13). "Babylon hath been a golden cup in the LORD's hand, that made all the earth drunken: the nations have drunken of her wine; therefore the nations are mad" (Jer. 51:7).

the sense of *judicial foolishness*: "He leadeth counsellors away spoiled, and maketh the judges fools" (Job 12:17). "That frustrateth the tokens of the liars, and maketh diviners mad; that turneth wise men backward, and maketh their knowledge foolish" (Isa. 44:25).

The Preacher understood that the wise man's wisdom is dependent on his conformity to biblical wisdom. He knew what biblical wisdom is. "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Eccl. 12:13–14).[6] When the wise man succumbs to bribery, he corrupts his own heart. He no longer can be trusted to declare an act as having conformed to or violated God's law. He abandons the art of casuistry: applying God's law to specific cases.

Conclusion

This verse indicates a concern with corrupt judgments by a civil judge. It is not talking about cheating by a businessman. Oppression here is not an economic act. It is a judicial act. It is a corrupting act.

6. Chapter 45.

25

FAITH IN PROGRESS

> *Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools. Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not enquire wisely concerning this.*
>
> ECCLESIASTES 7:8–10

This verse announces that the end is better than the beginning. Speaking as an autonomous man, he has already argued that sorrow is preferable to laughter. Why? Because sorrow is more realistic than laughter regarding the implications of death. The end of life is better than the beginning, because death puts an end to vanity.[1]

What is patience? The Hebrew word translated here as "patient" is translated as "slow" in all other cases in the King James Version. The Preacher contrasts a slow spirit with a hasty one. What is the meaning of hasty? The Hebrew word generally means troubled, vexed, or fearful. The context usually implies agitation. So, by "slow," the Preacher means calm. The phrase "steady as you go" is appropriate.

A. Patience vs. Pride

Why is the patient spirit better than the proud spirit? What does he mean by "proud"? The Hebrew word is best translated as "high." "Behold, the Assyrian was a cedar in Lebanon with fair branches, and with a shadowing shroud, and of an high stature; and his top was among the thick boughs" (Ezek. 31:3). The patient spirit focuses on the future: the end of the process. The proud spirit revels in the present: success attained as a result of the past. The patient spirit pays at-

1. Chapter 23.

tention to the pathway to the future. The proud spirit rejoices in what has already been accomplished. The patient spirit has a goal: moving up by moving forward. The proud spirit rejoices in previous attainments. The patient spirit sees the future as better than the present. The proud spirit sees the past as superior to the present. The proud spirit asks: "What is the cause that the former days were better than these?" The patient spirit sees the future as an uphill process. The proud spirit sees the future as a downhill process. The patient spirit sees victory in the future. The proud spirit sees defeat in the future. The patient spirit sees the future as progress. The proud spirit sees the future as decline. The patient spirit sees a benefit in exchanging the present for the future. The proud spirit sees the threat of loss in exchanging the present for the future.

The proud person rejoices in what he has attained. But when you are king of the hill, moving forward means moving down. The proud person wants to defend territory. The cost of moving forward is moving into the unknown. What is already known is success. The cost of moving forward is to risk the loss of success.

For the patient person, moving forward is an advantage. He sees the future as superior to the present. He believes this: "Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof." The past is inferior to the present. The future is superior to the present.

B. An Uphill Battle

The Preacher advises this: "Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not enquire wisely concerning this" (v. 10). For a person who is engaged in the work of extending the kingdom of God, all of life is an uphill battle. This work requires patience. Patience in turn requires confidence in the outcome of one's efforts. Confidence in the outcome of one's efforts requires confidence that the present is superior to the past. If the present is inferior to the past, then there is no legitimate confidence that the future will be better than the present. If things are going downhill, why would a wise person apply himself to an uphill task? Defending territory already secured is as much as a wise man would commit to. A program for moving uphill is illogical. It would waste resources. In the words of the dispensationalist radio pastor of the 1950s, J. Vernon McGee, "You don't polish brass on a sinking ship."

The proud man and the historical pessimist share a commitment to the present. The proud man counts the cost of change. The odds

seem poor. Why risk success in the present for the chance of attaining even more? The economist would analyze this in terms of marginal utility theory. Each additional unit of utility is worth less to a decision-maker than the previous unit. With each new unit of income, we satisfy those wants that are highest on our scale of economic value. Past wants were higher on our scale of value than those that remain now, other things remaining equal. Why continue to lay up treasure—success—when the cost of laying up treasure involves putting one's existing treasure at risk? Only if success is addictive—"The more you get, the more you want"—would such risky behavior make economic sense. The historical pessimist concludes much the same. Why risk whatever little remains when it takes everything we have just to slow the speed of sliding down even faster? The emphasis in both cases is on preserving existing territory rather than extending dominion.

The person who believes that the future will be superior to the present could take the attitude of sitting back and letting things drift. But he also knows that things roll down, not up. Things drift downstream, toward either the falls or the end of the river. Things do not drift upward. Put in scientific terms, entropy in a closed system inevitably undermines the remaining order of the present. The only way to reverse entropy is to import energy from outside the system. This is what God's grace provides: access to order from outside the sin-cursed realm of history.[2] This is why progressive sanctification, both personal and institutional, requires patience. It requires attention to detail. It requires time and capital.

Conclusion

The Preacher had faith in progress. He believed that the end is better than the beginning. He presented this perspective from the point of view of rival worldviews: autonomy and biblical covenantalism.

The autonomous man announces that the end is better than the beginning. Death is superior to birth. Sacrificing benefits in the present for benefits in the future is vanity. Why? Because death negates all success and all meaning. Death transfers the inheritance to a stranger of questionable motives and habits. The dissipation of the inheritance is inevitable. In modern terms, entropy rules the cosmos. Conclusion: there is no progressive sanctification. There is only vanity.

In contrast is biblical covenantalism. The end is better than the

2. Gary North, *Is the World Running Down? Crisis in the Christian Worldview* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1988).

beginning. Death is not the end. God brings final judgment. He distinguishes between success and failure, between meaningful labor and vanity, between patience and pride. "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Eccl. 12:13–14).[3]

The Preacher keeps exploring the implications of human autonomy. They lead only to dead ends.

3. Chapter 45.

26

WISDOM AND KINGDOM

Wisdom is good with an inheritance: and by it there is profit to them that see the sun. For wisdom is a defence, and money is a defence: but the excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom giveth life to them that have it.

ECCLESIASTES 7:11–12

A. Wisdom: Good or Meaningless?

The Preacher returns here to biblical covenantalism. He extols wisdom. Wisdom along with an inheritance is a good thing. Wisdom provides a profit. The Hebrew word translated as "profit" is more often translated as "more." It means "better." This observation is in contrast to an earlier observation:

> Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity. For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool. Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit (Eccl. 2:15–17).[1]

There is no meaningful wisdom, he writes. A fool and a wise man end up the same: dead. As for the value of an inheritance,

> There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is common among men: A man to whom God hath given riches, wealth, and honour, so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it: this is vanity, and it is an evil disease. If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days

1. Chapter 3.

> of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also that he have no burial; I say, that an untimely birth is better than he. For he cometh in with vanity, and departeth in darkness, and his name shall be covered with darkness. Moreover he hath not seen the sun, nor known any thing: this hath more rest than the other. Yea, though he live a thousand years twice told, yet hath he seen no good: do not all go to one place? All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled. For what hath the wise more than the fool? what hath the poor, that knoweth to walk before the living? (Eccl. 6:1–8)[2]

Here, we have rival concepts of the light of day. One is positive. "There is profit to them that see the sun." The other is negative. "For he cometh in with vanity, and departeth in darkness, and his name shall be covered with darkness. Moreover he hath not seen the sun, nor known any thing: this hath more rest than the other."

Unless we recognize that the Preacher is conducting a literary debate, theonomy vs. autonomy, we cannot make sense of the Book of Ecclesiastes. It is filled with contradictory observations.

B. A Wise Inheritance

The Preacher sees the great advantage that a wise man receives from an inheritance. The inheritance produces more, meaning a profit. But why is possessing more an advantage? To possess more means that a person becomes responsible for its management. With every increase in wealth comes an increase in opportunities. With every increase in opportunities comes an increase in responsibility.

> And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more (Luke 12:47–48).[3]

But what is the profit of profit? The Preacher wrote earlier: "Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun" (Eccl. 2:11).[4] He denied that there is such a thing as vanity-free profit. This is a correct implication of life outside the covenant.

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2. Chapter 21.
3. Gary North, *Treasure and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Luke*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 28.
4. Chapter 2.

Life inside the covenant is different. When a man is inside the covenant, he has access to wisdom. If he gains an inheritance, he can put it to profitable uses. His wisdom allows an increase in the inheritance. This is the covenantal system of inheritance: increase through time.[5] Using modern economists' terminology, this is value-added production.

They key asset is wisdom, not the inheritance. "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding" (Prov 4:7). "How much better is it to get wisdom than gold! and to get understanding rather to be chosen than silver!" (Prov. 16:16). Without wisdom, the inheritance can be dissipated. It can be put to unwise uses. *It is wisdom that puts the inheritance to good uses.*

The goal here is capital accumulation. Increased capital is necessary for the expansion of the kingdom. The kingdom of God competes with the kingdom of Satan. Each asserts total sovereignty in history. Each demands unconditional surrender of the other.[6] Each occupies territory. Each requires capital to occupy existing territory and to add to territory occupied.

A wise man inherits from the previous generation. How did the previous generation have capital to pass down? Because it had the skills of capital accumulation. *The requirement of kingdom expansion in history requires capital accumulation.* Each generation is to pass down more than it inherited to the next generation.

This refers more to intellectual and moral capital than to physical or economic capital. Intellectual and moral capital are multiplied by the number of covenantal heirs. The larger a family, the smaller the per capita monetary inheritance. The Psalmist wrote: "As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate" (Psalm 127:4–5). The recommendation here is a large family. This dilutes the per capita inheritance of physical or economic capital, but it multiples the inheritance of intellectual and moral capital. This is an implication of this: "Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their

5. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1987] 1992), ch. 5. Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory*, 5th ed. (Powder Springs, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1987] 2010), ch. 5.

6. North, *Unconditional Surrender.*

labour" (Eccl. 4:9).[7] The principle of the division of labor applies to intellectual labor. The broader the base of those who hold to a covenant, the more effective each member's knowledge and skills become, assuming that the covenant is favorable to cooperation.

The kingdom of man at the tower of Babel possessed an extensive division of labor. This offered that kingdom more opportunities.

> And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city (Gen. 11:6–8).

God scattered the people of the tower. This is the final outcome of autonomy. People do not cooperate in hell. A kingdom that begins with the autonomy of man as its presupposition cannot complete a tower stretching to heaven.

God undermined that kingdom by scattering it. But, through trade, men can overcome the limits of separation.[8] This is because *trade is a denial of autonomy*. It is a form of mutual dependence.

Conclusion

Biblical wisdom is required for the long-term building of the kingdom of God in history. So is an inheritance, which extends through history. An inheritance is more than physical. It is ultimately confessional. The scattering of mankind at Babel was linguistic and geographical, but it was also confessional.

7. Chapter 14.

8. Gary North, *Sovereignty and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Genesis* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1982] 2012), ch. 19.

27

LUKEWARM ETHICS

> *All things have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his wickedness. Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself? Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time?*
>
> ECCLESIASTES 7:15–17

Here, the Preacher speaks in terms of a way of practical living. He rejects the systematic pursuit of righteousness and wisdom. The middle path is the place of minimum expense. The rigorous pursuit of either righteousness or wisdom is contrary to an accurate cost-benefit analysis, he says.

Why should anyone believe this? Because he believes that there is no predictability of the Bible's specified covenantal sanctions. "There is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his wickedness." If a person pursues perfection as his goal in this world, the Preacher says, that person is self-deceived. Such a pursuit will get him nowhere. It could destroy him. Somewhere in between righteousness and wickedness lies safety and sanity. This also applies also to wisdom and foolishness. Life is not black and white; it is mostly gray. A prudent man walks a path between extremes, says the Preacher.

A. Psalm 73

This position rests on a rejection of what Psalm 73 teaches. The psalmist had observed that the sanctions seem to be perverse, not just random.

> For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men (Psalm 73:3–5).
>
> They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth (Psalm 73:8–9).

Subsequently, he concluded that his initial observations were misguided. "When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me; Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end. Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction. How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment! they are utterly consumed with terrors" (Psalm 73:16–19).[1] He chastised himself. "So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee" (Psalm 73:22).

The system of covenantal sanctions in history is ethically reliable, the psalmist said. Psalm 73 is an affirmation of the long-term reliability of these sanctions.

B. The Counter-Argument

The Preacher has an odd way of arguing. He presents an argument in one section. He counters it in another. Here, he argues on behalf of autonomous man. Later, he will argue on behalf of covenant-keeping man.

> And so I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done: this is also vanity. Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him: But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God (Eccl. 8:10–13).[2]

This encapsulates the argument of Psalm 73. There is ethical cause and effect in history. The covenant-breaker is lured into a trap by the delay of judgment. "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." He walks on a slippery slope.

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1. Gary North, *Confidence and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Psalms* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), ch. 17.
2. Chapter 30.

The Preacher immediately responds on behalf of autonomous man. "There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I said that this also is vanity" (Eccl. 8:14). Conclusion: "Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun" (v. 15). This does not answer the supreme question for an ambitious autonomous man: *the fate of his legacy, on which his relevance rests*. This is point five of the biblical covenant.[3]

How can the reader resolve this constant back-and-forth debate? Where is solid ground?

Autonomous man does not trust the social order to provide predictable sanctions. Neither does he trust God to provide such sanctions. Prudence under such circumstances involves finding a middle ground between righteousness and wickedness. He does not believe that there is a God who calls men to a high standard, nor does he believe that God enforces such a standard.

This outlook was condemned by the author of the Book of Revelation.

> And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth (Rev. 3:14–16).

Conclusion

The Preacher speaks for those who see no connection between the pursuit of righteousness and the expectation of positive sanctions. Such people are content with half-way measures.

This outlook undermines the pursuit of excellence. The pursuit of excellence begins with the pursuit of righteousness. This pursuit is a lifetime pursuit. It should begin young.

> Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word. With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me

3. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1987] 1992), ch. 5. Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory*, 5th ed. (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, [1987] 2010), ch. 5.

not wander from thy commandments. Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee. Blessed art thou, O LORD: teach me thy statutes (Psalm 119:9–12).

28

CONSTANT IMPROVEMENT

Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.

ECCLESIASTES 7:29

A. Creativity

The Hebrew word translated "upright" has to do with ethics. The word is used to designate a righteous person.[1] The Hebrew word translated "inventions" refers to devices of any kind. It is used only twice in the Old Testament. It is derived from a root word meaning "inventive." The implication of this verse is that righteous people are creative.

This verse does not say that unrighteous people are not creative. It does say that righteous people are creative. This implies that *a characteristic feature of the kingdom of God is its creativity*. Members of this kingdom seek out new ways of achieving their goals. They are not content with the range of opportunities they possess now. They imagine that there are better ways of doing things. They devote time and money to their search for better ways. There are several implications associated with such a view of righteous living.

This goes back to the creation week.

> And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And

1. Exodus 15:26; Numbers 23:10; Deuteronomy 6:18; 12:25; 21:9; 32:4.

> God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth (Gen. 1:26–28).

First, the dominion impulse is built into mankind.[2] Second, this fact was manifested in the garden of Eden. "And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it" (Gen. 2:15).[3] In paradise, there was room for improvement.

B. Entrepreneurship

To discover a new way of doing things takes a combination of skills that are possessed by everyone. To some extent, everyone who seeks a better way of achieving his goals is an entrepreneur. But there are specialists who possess these skills in a unique combination.

The entrepreneur looks into the future to see if there might be a market for a new way for people to achieve their goals. He looks at available products and services. He also imagines future demand. Then he seeks out new ways of meeting this expected demand.

He must buy resources: raw materials, land, capital, and labor. He then puts these to work in the production of a new product or service. He prices it to sell. He buys low in order to sell higher. His goal is either money or service. Either he uses the service as a way to accumulate money, or else he uses the money to continue to supply the service. The first goal is Adam Smith's self-interest. The second goal adheres more closely to the biblical standard of stewardship: service to God through service to His creation.

The world of the entrepreneur is filled with uncertainty.[4] Others have not seen this opportunity. Or maybe they have seen it and regard it as a trap. The entrepreneur may be confident that some service will be profitable in the future, but he cannot be sure. He could lose his money. In the United States, the number of patented inventions that fail to find a profitable market is high. The actual percentage is higher, because not all inventions are patented. Only those inventions whose inventors or financial backers think are worth the money to patent get patented. Estimates of failures of patented inventions

2. Gary North, *Sovereignty and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Genesis* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), chaps. 3, 4.
3. *Ibid*., ch. 8.
4. Frank H. Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921).

range between 80% (Pareto's law) and 99.9%.[5] No one knows. The percentage is either high or astronomically high—probably the latter.

The entrepreneur bears uncertainty for the sake of a large profit. He wastes his time and his money—and then investors' money—in the vast majority of cases. Yet the rate of progress of invention is high. Technological progress is so high that our world changes noticeably every other decade. Technological obsolescence is a way of life in the modern world. The rate of invention seems to be accelerating. This unquestionably is true in what is by far the most important single area of social transformation: the cost of accumulating, storing, and retrieving information.[6]

So, what is almost a sure thing—the failure of any given new invention—is the foundation of what has been attained by modern society, beginning no earlier than 1775 in Great Britain and no later than 1820: compound economic growth. The social process of transforming that which is doomed individually into that which guarantees benefits for society is the private property order and ethical outlook required by the Bible.

C. Confidence

For a person to invent a product, gain funding for it, and market it successfully is statistically so close to impossible that it would seem that no rational person would attempt it. Yet millions of people do. Small improvements in existing systems are common in every successful business. These are inventions. They are not patented inventions. Each one offers improvement so small that there is no way to measure it in the economy. Yet, taken as a whole, they provide sufficient economic growth to change the world we live in every other decade.

An inventor must be confident that his sacrifice in the present will produce a benefit in the future that is great enough to repay him for his effort. Jesus warned us to count the cost.

> For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish (Luke 14:28–30).[7]

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5. Andrew Spriegel, "Invention Success Rates" (2010): aspriegel.wordpress.com/2010/11/24/invention-success-rates-odds-of-inventor-success (accessed January 26, 2021).

6. Raymond Kurzweil, "The Law of Accelerating Returns" (2001).

7. Gary North, *Treasure and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Luke*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 35.

Despite the costs, covenant-keepers are supposed to innovate. This is not just for the foreign mission field, where the Wycliffe Bible translation program is innovative linguistically. It is for innovations of all kinds. There is room for improvement in every area of life. This includes economic theory.

Conclusion

The greater the level of confidence imparted by a worldview to its adherents, the more likely they will bear the uncertainty associated with innovation. The Psalms provide such confidence.[8] The Book of Ecclesiastes is divided. Most of it is not intended to inspire confidence. It is intended to expose the dead ends of the philosophy of autonomy. But this passage is surely confidence-building.

8. Gary North, *Confidence and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Psalms* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012).

29

THE UNCERTAINTY OF TIMING

Because to every purpose there is time and judgment, therefore the misery of man is great upon him. For he knoweth not that which shall be: for who can tell him when it shall be?

ECCLESIASTES 8:6–7

Is the Preacher speaking on behalf of the covenant-keeper or autonomous man? I think it is the latter. This is because autonomous man does not believe in prophecy or prophets. Under the Mosaic Covenant, there were prophets who did have access to God's purposes and His timing. Before the Mosaic Covenant, Joseph was given this ability in Egypt.[1] The lack of reliable guidance on the timing of decisions, great and small, produces misery, the Preacher says. This is a great burden for autonomous man.

For covenant-keepers, this lack of authoritative guidance is not a source of misery, or should not be. It is a source of confidence. They know that they have access to God's law as stewards of God. They are more likely to be the recipient of guidance than covenant-breakers are. They have a competitive advantage.

A. Using the Advantage

Do covenant-keepers take advantage of this advantage? The Bible provides evidence that they do not. One example is the reaction of the disciples to the death and entombment of Jesus. They scattered. Yet the Jewish authorities were well aware of what Jesus had taught about His resurrection.

1. Gary North, *Sovereignty and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Genesis* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1982] 2012), ch. 32.

> Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? But he spake of the temple of his body. When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said (John 2:19–22).

The disciples did not initially understand Jesus' words. The Jewish authorities were unaware that the disciples were unaware of what Jesus had taught.

> Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, Saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again. Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first. Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can. So they went, and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch (Matt. 27:62–66).

The disciples not only did not plan to steal the body, they had no understanding that Jesus had predicted His resurrection.

Covenant-keepers often seem to possess no advantage over covenant-breakers. This is because of their unwillingness to do what the Bible says they must do: obey God's law. The issue is ethics, not foreknowledge.

B. Ethics, not Foreknowledge

A covenant-keeper is supposed to believe that God is in charge of all things. God intervenes in history to achieve His purposes.

> I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things. Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness: let the earth open, and let them bring forth salvation, and let righteousness spring up together; I the LORD have created it. Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth. Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou? or thy work, He hath no hands? Woe unto him that saith unto his father, What begettest thou? or to the woman, What hast thou brought forth? Thus saith the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker, Ask me of things to come concerning my sons, and concerning the work of my hands command ye me. I have made the earth, and created man upon it: I, even my hands, have stretched out the heavens, and all their host have I commanded (Isa. 45:7–12).

The fact that covenant-keepers do not know the timing of events should not discourage them. God knows. He does not need to reveal Himself to covenant-keepers regarding His plans. They have God's Bible-revealed law to guide them. "The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). The predictable sanctions of God's law offer sufficient guidance: positive and negative feedback.

The Jewish leaders asked Jesus about the timing of the kingdom of God.

> And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you[2] (Luke 17:20–21).

The disciples asked what they imagined was the same question.

> When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth (Acts 1:6–8).

So, from the point of view of God, covenant-breakers' lack of knowledge about timing should not be a source of misery for covenant-keepers. Because covenant-keepers have the law and the prophets, but members of competing kingdoms do not, they have an advantage. They may decide not take advantage of this advantage, but they possess it. The key factor in the extension of the kingdom of God is ethics, not timing.

Conclusion

The Preacher identifies a source of misery: our lack of knowledge about the correct timing for implementing our purposes. "Because to every purpose there is time and judgment." *Implementation* is what he means by judgment.

The knowledge of timing is not crucial for covenant-keepers. It is

2. The Greek words translated as "within you" (*entos humone*) should probably be translated "in your midst," according to expositor Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of Luke to Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1951), p. 155.

useful, but it is not crucial. Time is not a threat to them, because God is sovereign over history. Timing is crucial for covenant-breakers, because they are running out of time. Time is their enemy, for the final judgment is their enemy (Rev. 20:14–15). Time is a tool for them, but it is a tool that works against them. "A good man leaveth an inheritance to his children's children: and the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just" (Prov. 13:22).[3]

What is crucial for covenant-keepers is ethics. Biblical ethics rests on biblical law. This is the conclusion of the Preacher in the final verses of his book. "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Eccl. 12:13–14).[4]

3. Gary North, *Wisdom and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Proverbs* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2007] 2012), ch. 41.

4. Chapter 45.

30

TIME RUNS OUT

And so I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done: this is also vanity. Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him: But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God.

ECCLESIASTES 8:10–13

Here, the Preacher speaks on behalf of covenant-keeping man. Previously, he presented a goad in his case against autonomous man by pointing to the indeterminacy of ethical outcomes in autonomous man's cosmos. "All things have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his wickedness" (Eccl. 7:15).[1] Here, he presents an explanation for this randomness: insufficient time.

A. Death

He begins here with death, which was his starting point in his critique of autonomous man. Autonomous man cannot escape death and its implications. Death is impersonal. Death impersonally consumes generations. "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever" (Eccl. 1:4).[2] Death impersonally consumes individuals. "For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days

1. Chapter 27.
2. Chapter 1.

to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool" (Eccl. 2:16).[3] This is one of the book's recurring sub-themes. "All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath" (Eccl. 9:2).[4]

Autonomous man is defenseless against the limited sovereignty of time, a defenselessness manifested in the final sovereignty of death. Nothing escapes death. *The philosophy of autonomy begins with the sovereignty of time, but then perishes in the sovereignty of death*. For modern man, this is the heat death of the universe: the cosmic triumph of impersonal entropy.[5] Each generation hopes to discover a way to structure its worldview in terms of life, but this attempt always fails. Autonomy is a philosophy of death.

The Preacher has already laid the groundwork. He continues to develop this theme. "And so I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done: this is also vanity." These people had gone in and out of the temple for years. They had escaped judgment on their evil deeds. The ecclesiastical authorities had not brought successful covenant lawsuits against these sinners. They had enjoyed free access to the house of God. They had seemed to be beyond negative sanctions. But then death arrived. Soon, they were forgotten.

Why did this matter? Because, in terms of the philosophy of individual autonomy, fame is all that remains after death. The economic inheritance, if any, passes to men of unknown commitments and talents (Eccl. 4:8).[6] It passes to strangers (Eccl. 6:1–2).[7] Men can take no legitimate hope in the outcome of their accumulation of riches. This leaves them with only hope in their fame. Here, the Preacher shuts the door on that hope. They will not be remembered.

B. The Death of Time

Time is the god of autonomous man, for time alone is creative in his system. But time runs out. Death is like an ogre's mouth at the end of days, chewing up everything that enters. The sinner has a fixed amount of time.

3. Chapter 3.
4. Chapter 33.
5. Gary North, *Is the World Running Down? Crisis in the Christian Worldview* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1988), ch. 2.
6. Chapter 13.
7. Chapter 21.

> To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted (Eccl. 3:1–2).[8]
>
> I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work (Eccl. 3:17).
>
> For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them (Eccl. 9:12).

The end comes. *When time is your god, death is your devil*. In the cosmos of autonomous man, the devil wins. The creativity of time ends for every living thing. For modern man, time itself ends in the heat death of the universe. Time's arrow falls to the frozen ground. There is no future; there is no memory of the past. Meaninglessness envelops all things. The end.

C. Delayed Sentencing

Sinners had come and gone from the temple with impunity. This had given them confidence. "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." This is an insecure confidence.

Men who escape sentencing for many years do not thereby escape judgment. "Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him: But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God." There are ethical standards. These standards do govern the imposition of God's sanctions. God is the source of the standards and the sanctions.[9] The future therefore belongs to God and His people.[10]

Delayed sanctions constitute slippery places. David had seen delayed sanctions, and what he saw disturbed him for a while.

> For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men. Therefore

8. Chapter 7.

9. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1987] 1992), chaps, 3, 4. Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory*, 5th ed. (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, 2010), chaps. 3, 4.

10. Sutton, ch. 5; North, ch. 5.

> pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them as a garment. Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish. They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth. Therefore his people return hither: and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them. And they say, How doth God know? and is there knowledge in the most High? Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches (Psalm 73:3–12).

He did not understand that delayed sanctions are a judgment against sinners.

> When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me; Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end. Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction. How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment! they are utterly consumed with terrors. As a dream when one awaketh; so, O Lord, when thou awakest, thou shalt despise their image. Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee (Psalm 73:16–22).[11]

The Preacher did understand this. He was not fooled by the delayed sanctions. The days of wicked are like a shadow. Reality is permanent.

Conclusion

The Preacher denies here that the philosophy of autonomy has legitimate hope. Good is not the same as evil. Wisdom is superior to foolishness. Time is not swallowed up by death. The end of life is not the end. Sinners will not finish well.

This gives legitimate hope to covenant-keepers. The wicked will be forgotten. "And so I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done: this is also vanity." The Preacher does not say here that covenant-keepers will be forgotten. He says elsewhere that they will be, but there, he speaks on behalf of autonomous man.

The work that a covenant-keeper does today has influence in the future. Death does not swallow up the future. The inheritance can compound over time.

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11. Gary North, *Confidence and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Psalms* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), ch. 17.

31

EAT, DRINK, AND BE MERRY

There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I said that this also is vanity. Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun.

ECCLESIASTES 8:14–15

A. Causation

The Preacher speaks here as autonomous man. The world is still all vanity. The world is ethically random. Good men lose. Bad men win. Yet he is beginning to waver. While it is true that good men lose and bad men win, the normal course of events is the opposite. The key phrase is "according to the work of." "There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just men, unto whom it happeneth **according to the work of** the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth **according to the work of** the righteous: I said that this also is vanity."

For autonomous man, there is no good reason why good men should prosper and bad men should lose. He has affirmed such a view before. "All things have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his wickedness" (Eccl. 7:15).[1] He is arguing against a rival view, the view presented in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. There is predictability between covenant-keeping

1. Chapter 27.

and success. There is covenantal predictability between righteousness and a long life, and also between covenant-breaking and a short life.

> Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee (Ex 20:12).[2]

This applies also to life-threatening diseases.

> And said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the LORD that healeth thee (Ex. 15:26).

> If thou wilt not observe to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that thou mayest fear this glorious and fearful name, THE LORD THY GOD; Then the LORD will make thy plagues wonderful, and the plagues of thy seed, even great plagues, and of long continuance, and sore sicknesses, and of long continuance. Moreover he will bring upon thee all the diseases of Egypt, which thou wast afraid of; and they shall cleave unto thee. Also every sickness, and every plague, which is not written in the book of this law, them will the LORD bring upon thee, until thou be destroyed (Deut. 28:58–61).[3]

The Preacher here comes in the name of autonomous man. He challenges the reliability of these covenantal patterns of sanctions in history. He calls into question the promises of God.

B. Let the Good Times Roll

He says that there is no reliable covenantal predictability based on obedience to God's Bible-revealed law. This leads to a conclusion. "Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun" (v. 15). His labor sometimes produces food, drink, and leisure. This is what abides with him during his lifetime. This is what lasts. This is what has continuity. But not for long. After he dies, there will be nothing. *Death ends all continuity.*

> There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after (Eccl. 1:11).

2. Gary North, *Authority and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Exodus* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), Part 1, *Decalogue and Dominion* (1986), ch. 25.

3. Gary North, *Inheritance and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1999] 2012), ch. 69.

> For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool (Eccl. 2:16).

Because death ends continuity, death is sovereign.[4] Death is the only continuous thing is history. The god of autonomous man is death. All other gods bow down to death. No other god can deliver man from death. Death inescapably imposes the great discontinuity. It is therefore the only continuity.

The Preacher affirms the benefits of enjoying the good times. He has done this before. He will do it again (Eccl. 9:7–12).[5] He has done so in the name of autonomous man. He has done so in the name of covenant man. As autonomous man, he recommends enjoyment as the best that we can hope for, while we have the opportunity. Nothing else is secure. "For that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun."

Conclusion

The present-orientation of the Preacher is obvious. If the present enjoyment of consumer goods is the one thing that we can count on, then thrift is a will-o-the-wisp.

Its outcome is unsure. Capital consumption is wise; capital formation is problematical. This is a prescription for impoverishment. This undermines inheritance. It undermines economic growth, including the growth of the kingdom. Because there is no predictability between ethical conformity to covenantal law and economic growth, he concludes that capital consumption is logical. The world is upside-down ethically. The wise course of action is to grab what you can whenever you can.

4. Chapter 3.
5. Chapter 33.

32

IGNORANCE IS NOT BLISS

When I applied mine heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth: (for also there is that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes:) Then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea further; though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it.

ECCLESIASTES 8:16–17

A. A Speechless God

This is autonomous man speaking. The Preacher acknowledges that there is a god, but he insists that this god does not reveal himself to men, even to wise men. This god is therefore wholly other: transcendent unto irrelevance.

The Preacher insists that a wise man cannot discover the work of God. This is incorrect. He can discover it in the Bible. It is legitimate to say that the wise man cannot discover all of the work of God (Deut. 29:29). Man is not omniscient. But the fact that he cannot discover the work of God comprehensively does not mean that he cannot discover it truly. Van Til summarized this position.

> Berkouwer quite rightly says that on the biblical approach there is no dualism in the idea of God. But this does not mean that man claims to have at any point an exhaustive understanding of things. It does not even mean that in some field, for instance, the field of science or that of philosophy, man aims at an exhaustive knowledge of reality. On the contrary, the biblical views involve the recognition of mystery everywhere. There is no fact in the universe that man understands or will understand comprehensively. But his presupposition is that, because God has created all things, there-

> fore he also controls and directs all things. Of course the believer does not seek to prove the existence of such a God. This God must be presupposed as the basis of all proof in any field. Thus the biblical position is not like that of rationalism or like that of irrationalism. Nor is it like any combination of these two. It is based on the presupposition that man knows truly though not comprehensively because God does know all things in terms of his self-contained being and has revealed himself to man.[1]

The Preacher comes as the Kantian theologian Karl Barth came: in the name of autonomous man.[2] The god of autonomous man is so far above man, so mysterious, that it does no good for man to search out the works of this god or the ways of this god. This has always been the underlying presupposition of autonomous men, for they seek to deny the God who brings final judgment (Rev. 20:14–15). If He has not revealed his work to men, then men are not responsible subordinate agents. This makes them supreme autonomous agents for as long as they can enforce their claim against god or any rival claimant. The god of autonomous man does not bring predictable judgments in history. History is the realm of autonomous man, who seeks to bring history under his control. This not the God of the Bible. Van Til wrote:

> No one has an exhaustive knowledge of God as revealed in the world. The Parmenidean idea that man has or can have such knowledge of God presupposes that man is autonomous. The Kantian notion that man can have no knowledge of the triune God also presupposes that man is autonomous. . . .
>
> As a covenant being man must seek to implicate himself into the revelation of God. If he is to see the facts of his environment for what they are, he must see them as being nothing more or less than bearers of the covenant requirements and promises of God. We may therefore say that man's proper method of obtaining knowledge is that of implication into God's revelation. . . .
>
> Our basic approach then is to accept on authority what Christ says in Scripture. Our basic presupposition is based on our belief that in Scripture God speaks to us. We cannot comprehend, i.e., exhaustively understand, what God says to us about anything.[3]

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1. Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1962), pp. 432–33.
2. *Ibid*.
3. Van Til, in E. R. Geehan (ed.), *Jerusalem and Athens Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971), p. 302.

B. A Matter of Responsibility

The Preacher, in the name of autonomous man, offers a counsel of despair. He says that a wise man can have no knowledge of the work of God. This, if true, places man outside the covenant. Logically speaking, as the Preacher speaks, we are not responsible if we have no knowledge of what God requires. But his premise is false. Men do have knowledge of what God requires. This condemns them. Paul wrote: "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another;)" (Rom. 2:14–15).[4]

The Preacher uses a phrase that has confused translators: "there is that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes." Does this refer to him in his quest for knowledge? Some translators have so translated it. The English Standard Version reads: "how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep." This refers to the magnitude of the task of understanding God's work.

The Preacher has hit the barrier announced by Moses: "The secret things belong unto the LORD our God" (Deut. 29:29a). This is an aspect of God's omniscience, which is an incommunicable attribute of God. When man confronts a barrier established by this attribute, he is supposed to back off. "Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour" (Rom. 9:20–21). To seek a degree of knowledge comparable to what God possesses is to seek to become God.

Autonomous man does not rely on the doctrine of the omniscience of God to provide his own derivative understanding. He does not believe that there is understanding derived from God. Thus, he must grasp the cosmos by means of his own mind. He builds his kingdom as the people at the Tower of Babel built theirs: without reference to God.

Conclusion

The Preacher articulates a fundamental presupposition of autonomous man: God has not revealed himself to us. This, autonomous

4. Gary North, *Cooperation and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Romans*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 3.

man believes, gets him off the covenantal hook. He will die, but that will end things. Autonomous man is willing to live in despair about history, despair about the meaninglessness of a life spent in a universe that is governed by death. For him, the first death is acceptable, just so long as he does not face the second death. "And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death" (Rev. 20:14). The Bible reveals a very different God and a very different end for covenant-keeping men.

> And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away (Rev. 21:1–4).

33

DEAD LIONS AND ECONOMIC STAGNATION

All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath. This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead. For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion.

ECCLESIASTES 9:2–4

A. Death and Differentiation[1]

The Preacher returns to one of his two major sub-themes regarding autonomous man: *the absolute sovereignty of death*. He goes to the heart of the matter once again.

> For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun (Eccl. 9:5–6).

He then says something that has become an aphorism in the Christian West: a living dog is better than a dead lion. It would make a fine inscription on the tombstone of autonomous man.

He speaks here on behalf of autonomous man. His observations are consistent with the philosophy of autonomy. He concludes that thinking defines a person. When thinking ceases because of death, everything else ceases. "For the living know that they shall die: but

1. Chapter 3.

the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten" (v. 5). The living know that they shall die. What does this mean for the living? That there is nothing to hope for. There will be no reward after death. There will be no memory of the dear departed, either. Even if there is some recollection initially, this will pass with the deaths of those who remember. The hope of fame comforts an elite among the living. It is a false hope.

What will remain of today's activities, emotions, and dreams? Nothing. "Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun" (v. 6). History is all there is, and once a person departs from history, there is nothing.

These verses are used by defenders of the concept of soul sleep to deny the existence of hell. But these passages, so interpreted, are equally as effective in countering heaven as hell. They are supportive of autonomous man in history. The price paid by autonomous man to gain such support is the destruction of meaning and hope. Without differentiation in terms of either ethics or historical significance, the present has no meaning. *When death swallows up everything, it swallows up differentiation*. Love, hatred, and envy are relevant in life because of the pleasure or pain they bring in the present, but there is no ratification by the future. "All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked" (v. 2).

B. Dogs and Lions

A dog in Bible times was not a respected animal.

> But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast: that ye may know how that the LORD doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel (Ex. 11:7).

> And the Philistine said unto David, Am I a dog, that thou comest to me with staves? And the Philistine cursed David by his gods (I Sam. 17:43).

> But be not thou far from me, O LORD: O my strength, haste thee to help me. Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog (Psalm 22:19–20).

In contrast, a lion was respected as a beast of prey.

> Behold, the people shall rise up as a great lion, and lift up himself as a young lion: he shall not lie down until he eat of the prey, and drink the blood of the slain (Num. 23:24).

> He couched, he lay down as a lion, and as a great lion: who shall stir him up? Blessed is he that blesseth thee, and cursed is he that curseth thee (Num. 24:9).
>
> And of Gad he said, Blessed be he that enlargeth Gad: he dwelleth as a lion, and teareth the arm with the crown of the head (Deut. 33:20).
>
> The fear of a king is as the roaring of a lion: whoso provoketh him to anger sinneth against his own soul (Prov. 20:2).

When the Preacher writes that it is better to be a live dog than a dead lion, he is making a powerful statement in favor of life over death. Death transforms a lion to such an extent that being a live dog is preferable. The fame of a dead lion is nothing. A live dog is better off.

C. Live It Up

Autonomous man lives without hope. He can enjoy only the present. The Preacher recommends this.

> Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.
>
> I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all. For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them (Eccl. 9:7–12).[2]

Time and chance happen to all living things. There is no predictable cause and effect in history. The earthly future of autonomous man is random. Death alone is predictable: the termination of cause and effect.

In such a world, future-orientation is naive, even foolish. The present is here; the future is problematical. The grave is certain.

In such a worldview, high interest rates are the result. To persuade a person to give up the use of consumer goods in the present in order

2. Chapter 34.

to gain additional consumer goods in the future is a difficult sell to a consistent autonomous man. Sacrifice in the present for the sake of greater wealth in the future is a high-risk venture. There is no advantage worth paying for, since time and chance are supreme. The present alone is sure.

This outlook is hostile to economic growth. It is hostile to progress. Economic growth and progress are financed by thrift. People turn over to entrepreneurs the money or tools that could be used for present enjoyment in order to fund future output. The more present-oriented a culture is, the higher the rate of expected return must be in order to persuade people to save.[3] Also, entrepreneurs must compete with present-oriented consumers for the funds made available by savers. Consumer loans pay higher rates of interest on producer loans.

Conclusion

The Preacher recommends present-orientation. On behalf of autonomous man, he proclaims a philosophy of life.

> Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun (Eccl. 8:15).[4]

This is a philosophy of stagnation, of history without progress.

3. Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1949), ch. 19.

4. Chapter 31.

34

WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH

Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.

ECCLESIASTES 9:7–10

A. The Sovereignty of Death

The Preacher again relies on his now-familiar exhortation regarding the sovereignty of death.[1]

> All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath. This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead. For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten (Eccl. 9:2–5).[2]

Here, he draws a conclusion: enjoy the moment. Live for the moment. The moment is all that we have. He had already come to this

1. Chapter 3.
2. Chapter 33.

conclusion.[3] But the final component of his conclusion here does not make sense, given the other implications of his worldview. Why should anyone work with all his might? The Preacher had already denied the wisdom of such effort with respect to the pursuit of righteousness and wickedness.

> In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him. All things have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his wickedness. Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself? Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time? (Eccl 7:14–17)[4]

He concludes that the ethical randomness of the lifetime outcomes of our labor should lead us to take things easy. To strive to attain either righteousness or wickedness is a waste of time and effort. "Go with the flow. Lighten up. Easy does it. Don't work yourself to death." "Why shouldest thou die before thy time?"

B. Hard Work

Then, without warning, he recommends hard, relentless work. He offers this reason: there will be no work in the grave. So what? If no man's memory survives in the grave (v. 10), and if no inheritance is secure,[5] and if the world will eventually forget about you,[6] what possible advantage is hard work in the present? Work for its own sake is madness. Work is either for the worker, or for itself, or to help others. He says here that work is for the sake of the worker, whose work will cease in death. But why should the worker revel in work? Why not revel in leisure? "Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment."

He speaks here in the name of autonomous man, who has no hope in the future. He has only the present. He must therefore savor all things, one by one, in the present. He must put his heart and soul into his work, for he has only the present.

This is present-orientation with a vengeance. It is grasping at straws. It is vanity. He knows it is vanity. "Live joyfully with the wife

3. Chapters 5, 20.
4. Chapter 27.
5. Chapters 4, 13, 21.
6. Chapters 3, 30.

whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun." He previously had said that both righteousness and wickedness should be pursued moderately. But what applies to ethics does not apply to work.

There is no logic to this conclusion, yet he draws it. The conclusion does not follow from his presuppositions regarding autonomous man. He is thrown back to the original covenant, the dominion covenant.

> And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth (Gen. 1:26–28).[7]

This covenant defines man. Man cannot be understood correctly apart from this. The Preacher invokes hard work because hard work, not consumption, defines man. High consumption is a product of hard work, but only randomly, according to the Preacher (Eccl. 9:10–11).[8] Hard work is its own reward. This is the essence of autonomy: the quest for self-reliance. It affirms that the Bible's system of covenantal sanctions in history is not reliable. It says that God does not bring sanctions in history according to His ethical requirements. Autonomy opposes theonomy.

In God's kingdom, work is always for God's sake, as mediated (represented) by some aspect of the creation. This is an implication of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. The Preacher not only does not make this clear here, he recommends a philosophy of life that militates against the covenantal view of work.

C. Why Invoke God?

The Preacher says: "Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works" (v. 7). On

7. Gary North, *Sovereignty and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Genesis* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), chaps. 3, 4.

8. Chapter 35.

what basis can autonomous man invoke God? The Preacher has done this before. "There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God" (Eccl. 2:24).[9]

This god grants blessings, but these blessings are not predictable. So, a man should enjoy them while he can. They are not reliable. They are not the product of ethical causation. They are the random blessings of a god who does not grant blessings on the basis of ethical conformity to His law.

In such a universe, man is a co-laborer with god. God has greater power, but He is not the god of the biblical covenant. A man does not need to subordinate himself to this god, through grace by faith. He merely enjoys whatever blessings this god arbitrarily bestows on people, according to no predictable system of causation. This is the god of autonomous man. This god allows men to make their own way through life. He intervenes, but capriciously. He is like a rich uncle who occasionally sends his nephew a present for no known reason. The nephew enjoys it while he can.

D. Present-Orientation vs. Entrepreneurship

The Preacher exhorts us to live for the moment, for the moment is all we have. Nothing else has any reliable foundation. The future is inherently unreliable. It leads to death, and death is sovereign.

The present-orientated person is ready to sacrifice future income for present consumption. The future is insecure, at best. The present is here. A bird in hand is better than two under the bush. Why risk a loss when the present is doing well?

This attitude is hostile to entrepreneurship. The future is too uncertain to justify entrepreneurship. The accent is on consumption now.

The Preacher recommends hard work. This is not logical. If the future is insecure and besieged by randomness, then hard work is no guarantee of future success. At best, it is indulged in for the pleasures it brings. But it brings pleasure only because God has made man in His image. God worked six days out of seven. The Preacher, in the name of autonomous man, rests his case for work on nothing. The recommendation makes sense only on the assumption that man is under the God of the covenant, not the god of autonomous man.

9. Chapter 5.

Hard work is not the essence of entrepreneurship. The laborer digging a ditch with a shovel works hard. He is not an entrepreneur. The driver of an earth-moving machine works less hard and accomplishes far more. Entrepreneurship is the vision, the forecasting, and the uncertainty-bearing[10] that are required to invent a better earth-moving machine.

The world is transformed more by entrepreneurs than by ditch-diggers. The Preacher here offers no encouragement to entrepreneurs. He does offer a way of self-justification for ditch diggers. He offers *the labor theory of value*: work for its own sake.[11]

Conclusion

The Preacher offers what appears initially to be a counsel of hope to offset his counsel of despair. His doctrine of the sovereignty of death offers no meaningful hope. Impersonal death swallows up everything in the end, thereby undermining all meaning. Some men seek power; others prefer escape. Neither strategy makes any meaningful difference in the cosmology of autonomous man. The Preacher therefore abandons all meaning in the name of consumption. Enjoy! Yet he also recommends hard work. Why would anyone enjoy work in preference to leisure? With this philosophy of history, a commitment to hard work undermines the commitment to leisure. Hard work is not logical in a world in which death is sovereign, inheritance is uncertain, and outcomes are ethically random.

The Preacher is grasping at logical straws, for this is what autonomous man does. In full public view, the Preacher is making the case for autonomous man's worldview. This worldview is self-defeating. It is a counsel of despair.

10. Frank H. Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty, and Profit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921).

11. This was the error of classical economics. The subjective value revolution in economic theory that began in the early 1870s rejected the labor theory of value.

35

THE SECONDARY SOVEREIGNTY OF CHANCE

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

ECCLESIASTES 9:10–11

A. Random Outcomes

The Preacher speaks here as autonomous man. For him, death is the ultimate sovereign.[1] Time is a tertiary sovereign. Why? Because time cannot overcome death. Time is governed by the secondary sovereign: chance. For autonomous man, chance governs history until death intervenes. It is death > chance > time.

He says here that there is no predictable causality between swiftness and victory in a race, or between strength and victory in a war. There is no predictable bread to the wise, nor predictable riches to men of understanding. The outcomes are inherently random, no matter what history seems to indicate. *Men are deceived by randomness*. What appear to be causal sequences are in fact illusions. Autonomous man should not count on anything.

The priests of Philistia knew better. When the victorious army brought back the Ark of the Covenant, each city that hosted it was struck by a plague. Each city then passed the Ark on to the next city, and the scenario was repeated. The priests decided that the presence of the Ark might be the source of the plagues. So, they devised a test.

> Now therefore make a new cart, and take two milch kine, on which there hath come no yoke, and tie the kine to the cart, and bring their calves

1. Chapter 3.

> home from them: And take the ark of the LORD, and lay it upon the cart; and put the jewels of gold, which ye return him for a trespass offering, in a coffer by the side thereof; and send it away, that it may go. And see, if it goeth up by the way of his own coast to Beth-shemesh, then he hath done us this great evil: but if not, then we shall know that it is not his hand that smote us; it was a chance that happened to us.
>
> And the men did so; and took two milch kine, and tied them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home: And they laid the ark of the LORD upon the cart, and the coffer with the mice of gold and the images of their emerods. And the kine took the straight way to the way of Beth-shemesh, and went along the highway, lowing as they went, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left; and the lords of the Philistines went after them unto the border of Beth-shemesh (I Sam. 6:7–12).

The priests recognized the difference between God's negative sanctions and random events. The priests were not intimidated by what might have been chance. They saw that they had to make a decision. They let untrained but domestic animals do this for them. They even rigged the test in favor of the retroactive explanation of chance. They left the calves inside Philistia. The outcome was what they had suspected.[2]

B. Covenantal Causation

God revealed to Moses that social causation is governed by ethics. There are positive sanctions.

> And it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments which I command thee this day, that the LORD thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth: And all these blessings shall come on thee, and overtake thee, if thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God. (Deut. 28:1–2).

There are also negative sanctions.

> And thou shalt not go aside from any of the words which I command thee this day, to the right hand, or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them. But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day; that all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee (Deut. 28:14–15).[3]

2. Gary North, *Disobedience and Defeat: An Economic Commentary on the Historical Books* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), ch. 13.

3. Gary North, *Inheritance and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1999] 2012), ch. 69.

This outlook is what the Preacher, speaking on behalf of autonomous man, forthrightly denies here. He is making the case against the predictability of the world around us. If all things are governed by chance, then the case for righteousness is blunted. So is the case against sin. Men should seek a middle way.

> All things have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his wickedness. Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself? Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time? (Eccl. 7:15–17)[4]

The concept of covenantal causation militates against such a view. When it comes to righteousness, here is the rule: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might" (v. 10a). This places work within a covenantal context.

Conclusion

The Preacher is not arguing for chance in preference to necessity, as modern man does. He is arguing for chance in preference to the covenant. The covenant affirms predictability in terms of God's law and God's sanctions in history (Lev. 26; Deut. 28). The Preacher here denies such predictability.

When Christians deny that covenantal predictability exists in the New Covenant, they must move in one of three directions, toward: (1) the Preacher's affirmations here; (2) modern man's affirmation of necessity (Kant's phenomenal realm of science) over chance; or (3) modern man's affirmation of chance (Kant's noumenal realm of personality) over impersonal scientific necessity.[5] None of these views self-consciously promotes the extension of the kingdom of God.

4. Chapter 27.

5. Richard Kroner, *Kant's Weltanschauung* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1914] 1956).

36

MONEY AND POWER RELIGION

There was a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it: Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that same poor man. Then said I, Wisdom is better than strength: nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard.

ECCLESIASTES 9:14–16

A. Poverty and Influence

The Preacher says that the poor wise man may be able to persuade rulers to adopt a city-saving policy, but only when the city is visibly facing a defeat. After it survives, no one remembers the name of the poor man.

Why should this be? He implies that this is because wisdom is associated with wealth. There is a phrase, "If he's so smart, why isn't he rich?" Put another way, "Intelligence is as intelligence does." If a man does not use his intelligence to accumulate a lot of money, what good is it?

This is a misunderstanding of wisdom and wealth. The author of the Book of Proverbs prayed this:

> Two things have I required of thee; deny me them not before I die: Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain (Prov. 30:7–9).[1]

1. Gary North, *Wisdom and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Proverbs* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2007] 2012), ch. 85.

Biblical wisdom is casuistry: the application of biblical law to specific circumstances. The pre-eminent passage in the Bible on wisdom is Psalm 119, which is devoted to declaring the magnificence of God's law. It is not a declaration of natural law.

B. Power Religion

The Preacher is speaking on behalf of autonomous man. He describes autonomous man's autonomous society. There, a wise man's wisdom is accepted only when there is no alternative. Everyone else has offered his opinion. No one's opinion offers legitimate hope. There is no escape. Now what? "Now there was found in it a poor wise man." In other words, someone went looking for a person who could offer a plausible way of escape. This man was nobody's first choice of counsel. He had no ready access to the corridors of power. He was out of the loop.

This was a unique situation. It is not every day that a king besieges a city. Those inside the gates had no experience in dealing with such a problem. The experts had been caught flat-footed. Their opinions carried little weight. There was no plausible plan of action. Defeat was imminent. Only at this point did the recommendation of a wise man have an opportunity to be heard. Only then did the Establishment allow an outsider to invade its turf. As soon as the emergency had passed, the Establishment dismissed the wise man. It did not elevate him to a place of permanent influence. It covered up the evidence that an outsider had saved the city. He was soon forgotten.

The premier example biblical of this process of rags to riches to forgetfulness is Joseph. He was a poor man: a foreigner in a prison. He was found—remembered—by the king's servant, but only after none of the wise men of Egypt could interpret Pharaoh's dream. He saved Egypt from the worst effects of famine. Yet within 135 years,[2] "there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph" (Ex. 1:8). Egypt had no profitable use for the God of Joseph any longer. It wanted profitable slaves, not heirs of a prophet.

Autonomous man wants the benefits of subordination to an all-powerful God. He does not want actual subordination. He wants strength, not wisdom. "Then said I, Wisdom is better than strength:

2. The Israelites' stay in Egypt was 215 years: half of the 430 years mentioned by Paul (Gal. 3:17). Gary North, *Authority and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Exodus* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), Part 1, *Representation and Dominion* (1985), ch. 1:A:1. The exodus took place when Moses was 80 (Ex. 7:7).

nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard." Autonomous man and autonomous society seek power, not subordination. Theirs is the power religion. The Pharaoh of the exodus was a representative of the power religion. He was completely defeated. He did not perceive the value of wisdom. Biblical wisdom begins with subordination to God. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Prov. 1:7).

Conclusion

Autonomous man equates wisdom with money, and money with power. He wants power. He does not want subordination.

The Preacher describes a city that was facing the ultimate subordination: military defeat. No one had a plan to escape defeat. Only then did a poor man get a hearing. After his plan worked, the powers that be made sure that the public's memory of his victory and their embarrassment was suppressed.

This criticism does not apply to biblical religion. Moses was never forgotten in Israel after the exodus. He was not remembered as a shepherd. David, another ex-shepherd, was not forgotten as a king. Jesus, the Good Shepherd (John 10:11), is not forgotten as the King of kings. All three demanded and received subordination. Those who rejected this subordination perished: Korah and Dathan, Nabal and Ahithophel, and Judas Iscariot.

37

HIERARCHY AND JUDGMENT

There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, as an error which proceedeth from the ruler: Folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in low place. I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth.

ECCLESIASTES 10:5–7

A. A Poor Judge

A ruler rules by exercising judgment. He assesses the circumstances; then he issues a command. The language here indicates that a ruler has shown poor judgment.

This ruler elevates folly to a position of dignity. He sets the rich in a low place. The Preacher sees this as a reversal of correct priorities. The foolish ruler places something first that ought to be last. Folly is clearly something to be avoided. The Preacher contrasts this with placing something at the bottom that ought to be at the top: the rich. The contrast does not make sense if the rich do not belong on top.

The Preacher is speaking here as a covenant-keeper. He does not declare that bad judgment is vanity. Everyone knows this. When he speaks as an autonomous man, there is equality of vanity. Judgment makes no difference. Wisdom makes no difference. Folly makes no difference. By identifying folly as occupying the high position, he is invoking the concept of permanent standards. This implies the existence of wise judgment—judgment that conforms itself to permanent standards. This ruler does not exercise wise judgment.

The Preacher's contrast between riches and folly rests on a conclusion: *riches as legitimate rather than evil*. A wise ruler ought to acknowledge that rich men have attained their wealth through wise judgment.

They either accumulated wealth or else maintained an inheritance. In either case, they are doing something right. Not many men are rich. These men have distinguished themselves from others, who do not possess the skills required to get rich.

The Preacher is not saying that the ability to get rich is the sole criterion for being elevated to a position of dignity. He is saying that the ability to get rich is superior to folly. *Wealth is an objective criterion of superior performance*. Those people who perform in a superior way ought to be regarded by a ruler as people whose judgment is more reliable than the judgment of those who are undistinguished. If a ruler is to receive wise counsel, he should consult with rich people.

B. Criteria for Judgment

William F. Buckley, Jr., the most prominent American political conservative intellectual in the second half of the twentieth century, once quipped that he would rather be governed by the first 200 people whose names appear in the Boston telephone directory than by the faculty of Harvard University. He did not say this because he graduated from Yale. His book-long critique of Yale, which he wrote at age 25, made him a national figure overnight.[1] He was making a point that was not unlike the Preacher's: folly is not to be elevated to high civil office. He regarded the criteria for being appointed to Harvard's faculty by a committee of Harvard professors as resting on ideological folly. Thus, their superior academic performance is evidence of ineligibility in positions of civil responsibility.

We could dismiss the quip as clever but not to be taken seriously. Yet in one crucial area of Anglo-American civilization, we demand that the principle of judgment underlying Buckley's quip be honored by law: *jury selection*. One foundation of liberty is a jury of one's peers. Any attempt by the state's judicial agents to screen access to a jury by means of academic criteria employed by the Harvard faculty to screen itself would be regarded by common men and most educated men as a threat to their liberty.

A candidate for a politically appointed judgeship might gain an advantage by having graduated from the Harvard Law School. A judge is supposedly a skilled interpreter of the law. But in criminal cases, people in Anglo-Saxon nations do not want judges to interpret the criminal law. They want juries to interpret the criminal law. They

1. William F. Buckley, *God and Man at Yale* (Chicago: Regnery, 1951).

want judges to confine themselves to ruling on matters of courtroom procedure. This is not the same thing as exercising rulership.

Wealth is one criterion for exercising rulership. The Preacher singles out wealth as the opposite of folly. It is better to be rich than a fool. It is better for a ruler to listen to rich people than to listen to foolish people. They are more likely to be wise than fools.

The Preacher assumes that the criteria for becoming rich are not based on corruption or violence. What disturbs him in this passage is that objective standards for success are not honored by rulers and those who imitate foolish rulers. "I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth." There is always a hierarchy of values in a society.[2] There is always a hierarchy of performance in terms of this hierarchy of values. Winners are few.

C. The Religion of Revolution

Hierarchy is an inescapable concept. It is never a question of hierarchy vs. no hierarchy. It is always a question of which hierarchies, in which spheres of life, enforcing which laws and values. Those who meet the criteria for rulership must not be treated as servants, nor should servants be treated as rulers. It was one of the great evils of ancient pagan societies that they celebrated Chronos festivals, where fools would rule for a week and then be executed. Such an inversion of hierarchy was regarded as a source of social regeneration: chaos over order. This was an intensely anti-biblical worldview. I wrote the following in the mid-1960s.[3]

In all but the Biblical cosmology, the creation was seen as the imposition of order upon a chaotic matter. Thus, in the festivals and other rituals of chaos, society was thought to have access to that vital matter which existed before form was imposed to stifle its free action. Roger Caillois has explained this pagan cosmology, focusing his attention on the festival: "It is a time of excess. Reserves accumulated over the course of several years are squandered. The holiest laws are violated, those that seem at the very basis of social life. Yes-

2. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1987] 1992), ch. 2. Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory*, 5th ed. (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, [1980] 2012), ch. 2.

3. Gary North, *Marx's Religion of Revolution: Regeneration Through Chaos* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1968] 1989), pp. 74–75.

terday's crime is now prescribed, and in place of customary rules, new taboos and disciplines are established, the purpose of which is not to avoid or soothe intense emotions, but rather to excite and bring them to climax. Movement increases, and the participants become intoxicated. Civil or administrative authorities see their powers temporarily diminish or disappear. This is not so much to the advantage of the regular sacerdotal caste as to the gain of secret confraternities or representatives of the other world, masked actors personifying the Gods or the dead. This fervor is also the time for sacrifices, even the time for the sacred, a time outside of time that recreates, purifies, and rejuvenates society. . . . All excesses are permitted, for society expects to be regenerated as a result of excesses, waste, orgies, and violence." [4]

The festival is a ritual recreation of some key event in the life of a society. Perhaps the most famous of the creation festivals were the Saturnalia, the New Year, and the spring fertility rites. There was an identification with those first days of the universe where no rules bound creation. "It is the Golden Age: the reign of Saturn and Chronos, without war, commerce, slavery, or private property."[5] "It was an age of total abundance, but also one of terror, where dark forces were loose in the universe. Both elements were therefore present in the festivals."[6] Here was the primitive conception of the form-matter controversy or the nature-freedom scheme: law was seen both as a limitation on man and simultaneously a barrier against the terrors of the unknown. The function of the excesses was to pour vitality into the world of order: "All living things must be rejuvenated. The world must be created anew."[7] "The traditions of the festival have been preserved in modern times in isolated primitive cultures, as well as in many folk customs, such as the Mardi Gras and the Carnival."[8]

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4. Roger Caillois, *Man and the Sacred* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1959), p. 164. Cf. Thorold Jacobson's analysis of the meaning of festivals in Henri Frankfort, *et. al., Before Philosophy* (Baltimore, Maryland: Pelican, [1946] 1964), pp. 213–16. This volume was previously published by the University of Chicago Press under the title, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*. [It has been republished under the older title.]

5. Caillois, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

6. Sir James George Frazer, *The Scapegoat*, vol. 4 of *The Golden Bough* (London: Macmillan, 1925), pp. 306–7.

7. Caillois, *op. cit.*, p. 101. Cf. A. J. Wensinck, "The Semitic New Year and the Origin of Eschatology," *Acta Orientalia,* Old Series, I (1923), pp. 158–99.

8. Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965).

Conclusion

Social order is strengthened by a consistent implementation at every level of biblical ethics, which in turn should be governed by biblical law. This is the judicial art of casuistry: the application of biblical law to specific situations. The Bible's hierarchy of values is to be visibly honored by rulers.

Rich people are winners in a godly society. Wherever rich people are not regarded as winners, a society is not consistently biblical. This is an inescapable conclusion inferred from this passage. Another conclusion is that men who are eligible for high office should not walk when servants ride. Society always honors hierarchy. It had better honor a biblical hierarchy.

38

JUSTIFYING PARALYSIS

He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him. Whoso removeth stones shall be hurt therewith; and he that cleaveth wood shall be endangered thereby.

ECCLESIASTES 10:8–9

A. A Threatening Environment

The Preacher speaks here in the name of autonomous man. This autonomous man is not the self-confident image of autonomy that Karl Marx liked to promote as his lifetime model: Prometheus.[1] Rather, he sees himself as surrounded by threatening limits. Whenever he makes a cost-benefit analysis, he sees mostly costs.

The Preacher's predictions represent a pattern of causation. They are all negative. Men are surrounded by limits that hamper their efforts to change their environment. Everywhere autonomous man turns, his environment constitutes a threat. Anyone who takes these predictions seriously begins at a disadvantage when compared with someone who sees God as absolutely sovereign and the cosmos under the dominion of covenant-keepers. He sees costs where the covenant-keeper sees opportunities.

The covenant-breaker sees the universe as hostile to man. The covenant-keeper sees the universe as under man's lawful authority. The covenant-breaker sees risk and uncertainty everywhere. These negative forces undermine most people's efforts to overcome them, the Preacher says. The covenant-keeper believes that these limits are part

1. Leonard P. Wessell, Jr., *Prometheus Bound: The mythic structure of Karl Marx's scientific thinking* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984).

of God's curse, and that this curse can be progressively overcome in history, which is what God revealed to Moses, and through Moses to the people of God.

B. God's Curse

The limits described here are aspects of God's curse on Adam and Adam's field of dominion (Gen. 3:17–19).[2] The goal of this dual curse was two-fold: to restrict mankind's ability to commit gross evil and to offer hope of dominion through God's grace. The first aspect of the curse is reflected in the traditional saying, "The devil loves idle hands." When covenant-breakers possess extended leisure, they are dangerous. They will pursue evil because they have time on their hands. The common curse on man and his labor is God's common grace of restricting debauchery and violence.

The second aspect of the curse offers a way of release from this curse. Through grace-initiated adherence to biblical law, covenant-keepers can advance both their self-interest and the kingdom of God. The system of covenantal sanctions described in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 reveals a world in which there are positive sanctions for obedience and negative sanctions for disobedience. *This ethical cause-and-effect system favors the extension of the kingdom of God at the expense of the kingdom of man*. Autonomous man rejects the thought of lifelong individual and corporate covenantal subordination to God's Bible-revealed law-order. He wants to avoid such subordination. So, he is at a competitive disadvantage to covenant-keepers whenever they conform themselves to God's law.

The covenantal system of cause and effect is a subsidy to covenant-keepers. It is a subsidy to the kingdom of God. The world is not a level playing field between covenant-keepers and covenant-breakers. It is a rigged arena that favors covenant-keepers.

Covenant-breakers do have two major advantages. First, there is common grace.[3] Covenant-breakers are numerous. They are influential. They receive God's blessings. Second, the division of labor favors those societies and civilizations that are united through confession. During those periods of covenant-breaking in which there is widespread social co-operation, through voluntary exchange or em-

2. Gary North, *Sovereignty and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Genesis* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1982] 2012), ch. 12.

3. Gary North, *Dominion and Common Grace: The Biblical Basis of Progress* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economic, 1987).

pire or both—as in Jesus' day—the kingdom of man advances alongside the kingdom of God. The division of labor is productive for all men. It extends men's dominion. Because the Adamic covenant extends so widely, those who are united by various confessions of faith opposed to the God of the Bible enjoy high productivity. Think of the hundreds of millions of covenant-breaking graduates of the modern humanistic education system. Compare their numbers and opportunities with the graduates of under-funded Christian day schools and Bible colleges. The humanists are committed to building a civilization. They possess enormous capital. They have an extensive division of labor. By comparison, the tiny numbers of Bible college graduates or Christian liberal arts college graduates are not interested in building a civilization, and they possess little capital.

Nevertheless, covenant-breaking man cannot remain permanently committed to a social order that honors the externals of biblical law: private property, personal responsibility, profit and loss, the rule of law, decentralized civil government, and the enforcement of contracts. Sooner or later, covenant-breakers rebel.[4] They lose their advantages. *The fall of the Roman Empire and its replacement by Christian civilization is the consummate indicator of this process*. The replacement took two forms, eastern and western Christendom, but neither was Roman. Polytheism disappeared, except as underground aspects of folk culture.[5]

C. Reversing the Curse

The Preacher's points are well taken. "He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it." There is a solution. "And if a man shall open a pit, or if a man shall dig a pit, and not cover it, and an ox or an ass fall therein. The owner of the pit shall make it good, and give money unto the owner of them; and the dead beast shall be his" (Ex. 21:33–34).[6] By an expenditure of time and money, a person can reduce the threat by covering the pit. Biblical law offers an incentive to do this: responsibility. There are negative sanctions for causing an injury.

"Whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him." Serpents live in hedges. So, a wise man uses tools to break down a hedge. He

4. *Ibid.*, chaps. 6, 7.

5. John Cuthbert Lawson, *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion: A Study in Survivals* (New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, [1910] 1964). Published originally by Cambridge University Press.

6. Gary North, *Authority and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Exodus* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), Part 3, *Tools of Dominion* (1990), ch. 41.

watches for serpents. He beheads them with a spade or other tool. The serpent is ultimately subservient to man. His resistance shall be overcome.

> And the LORD God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life: And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel (Gen. 3:14–15).

"Whoso removeth stones shall be hurt therewith." Quarrymen do face risks. This is why they have safety codes. Every high-risk profession does.

"He that cleaveth wood shall be endangered thereby." Wood-splitting is dangerous. There are few occupations more dangerous than logging. Men should therefore be careful with their tools. One of the ways to do this is to sharpen the axe's blade. The Preacher knew this. "If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength: but wisdom is profitable to direct" (Eccl. 10:10). Axes are a threat, too. The Mosaic law acknowledged this.

> As when a man goeth into the wood with his neighbour to hew wood, and his hand fetcheth a stroke with the axe to cut down the tree, and the head slippeth from the helve, and lighteth upon his neighbour, that he die; he shall flee unto one of those cities, and live: Lest the avenger of the blood pursue the slayer, while his heart is hot, and overtake him, because the way is long, and slay him; whereas he was not worthy of death, inasmuch as he hated him not in time past (Deut. 19:5–6).

This was the law of the blood avenger.[7] The negative sanction—execution for manslaughter—was an incentive to take care of dangerous tools. Safety is important. There are ways to reduce the likelihood of injury. These ways increase short-term costs, but they reduce long-term costs by reducing injuries.

Conclusion

For each limit placed on the sons of Adam there are ways of overcoming it. A consistent covenant-keeper seeks out these ways. A consistent covenant-breaker is content to remain hedged in. His goal is

7. It was annulled operationally after the return from the exile: no cities of refuge, and no civil government that enforced the Mosaic code. It was annulled theologically when the office of high priest was annulled at the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

consumption, not increased production. "Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun" (Eccl. 8:15).[8] The dual motivations reflect rival covenants.

8. Chapter 31.

39

WASTED EFFORTS

The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city.

ECCLESIASTES 10:15

The foolish man suffers from a lack of information. He works, but his efforts are wasted. He knows how to achieve a limited task, but he does not know how to market his output. He grows weary in his labor, but when he has produced whatever it is that he has labored to produce, he does not know how to profit from it.

The Preacher uses the city as a metaphor of the market place. A city is a place of commerce. There, the division of labor is more extensive than in the countryside. There is a higher population density. Urban people do not consume the output of their labor. They exchange their output for money. They buy most of what they consume. Their per capita output is greater than in the countryside.

The foolish person does not know the way to the city. He does not understand how to access the place of commerce, where his output will find a ready market. He is able to produce something of value, but he is unable to maximize the value of his output by carrying it to a city, where there will be far more bidders for his output.

It is not sufficient to know how to produce something of value. If you do not know how to find a market for your output, you will waste your effort. You can invest time and money in the production process, but this is not enough. Products do not sell themselves. Marketing sells products. *The foolish man believes in the labor theory of value*. He thinks that just by producing an item, he will benefit from its sale. This is incorrect. The key to profitability is the ability and willingness

to bring the work of your hands to a buyer.

There are more buyers in cities than in the countryside. But the fool does not possess the information required to turn his output into income. He needs to know the way to the city. This means that must know how to market whatever he produces. He must know how to give consumers the opportunity to bid against each other for his product.

Conclusion

The futility of working for a rate of return that does not compensate the fool for his time and effort wearies him. Weariness is more burdensome to someone who is not profiting from his work than to someone who is. He loses hope. He cannot get from here to there—"there" being success.

The Preacher dismisses as a fool anyone who does not understand how to find a market for his output. His efforts are wasted.

40

THE COSTS OF SLOTH

By much slothfulness the building decayeth; and through idleness of the hands the house droppeth through.

ECCLESIASTES 10:18

A. Entropy and Time

Things wear out. This is a universal observation. Entropy is a manifestation of the second law of thermodynamics. Things move toward randomness. Order breaks down. *Order is not a free resource*. The second law of thermodynamics is this: in a closed system, heat moves from hotter to colder. Put differently, energy disperses over time.

The Preacher did not know the second law of thermodynamics, but he recognized its operation. It takes effort to keep things from wearing out. The world is under a curse. The curse is not the tendency toward randomness. A carburetor would have operated in the garden of Eden. So would the distribution of molecules to men's olfactory organs. Flowers would have smelled good to men there. The curse is the extension of the decay of randomness to aspects of the creation who had not been affected before God cursed the ground (Gen. 3:17–18).[1]

To offset the universal decay associated with the second law of thermodynamics, men must invest time, raw materials, and labor. They must forfeit the use of these valuable assets in order to repair the erosion that time causes. To do nothing is to fall behind.

1. Gary North, *Sovereignty and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Genesis* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1982] 2012), ch. 12. Gary North, *Is the World Running Down? Crisis in the Christian Worldview* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1988), ch. 2.

Time is an irreversible capital asset. Once gone, it cannot be recovered. Within the confines of time, a person can reverse the effects of entropy. He can offset disorder. This takes effort and resources. This means that the slothful person faces a challenge. Whatever he owns is under assault. His sloth places him at a disadvantage with an industrious person. *A slothful person lets time get away from him without converting it into something useful to anyone else.* Time gets away from everyone, but the fruits of time are different for different people. The slothful person does not devote labor and resources to overcoming the corrosive effects of entropy. Things wear out, including people. At some point, entropy kills all living forms.

The sovereignty of death can be seen in entropy. But entropy is not final. God's final judgment is final. Then the curse will be removed from covenant-keepers and all things under their jurisdiction. Paul wrote:

> For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body (Rom. 8:20–23).[2]

Because entropy can exist without the sovereignty of death in an open system, the world under God's grace can and will overcome death. This is taught in First Corinthians 15.

> For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death (I Cor. 15:25–26).
>
> So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body (I Cor. 15:42–44).
>
> For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? (I Cor. 15:53–55)[3]

2. Gary North, *Cooperation and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Romans*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 5.

3. Gary North, *Judgment and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on First Corinthians*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2001] 2012), ch. 16.

B. The Greatest Reversal

The greatest reversal is the transition from wrath to grace. This is seen in the transition from death to life. John the Baptist announced: "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36).

The transition from death to life is seen in economic growth. The effects of entropy are overcome through the combination of raw materials and labor over time, which produces capital.[4] As capital increases, assuming that it is used efficiently by future-oriented entrepreneurs to serve God through serving the creation, the effects of entropy are reversed. This reversal is an aspect of the grace of God. The universe is not a closed entity. It is open to God, who created it and sustains it.

> Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins: Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist (Col. 1:13–17).

Thus, Paul wrote, "Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily" (Col. 1:29). God worked in him, overcoming weariness. This was a form of supernatural capital.[5]

Conclusion

The slothful man is a loser. He loses capital. That which he owns erodes away if he does nothing to reverse this process. The Preacher describes the negative effects of sloth. He does not call for a slothful man to labor. He merely warns him of the consequences of not laboring. This warning assumes that the listeners do not want to see their buildings decay and their houses fall. But this desire must be qualified with the economist's universal qualification, "at some price." At some very high wage, a slothful person may work. But slothful peo-

4. Murray N. Rothbard, *Man, Economy, and State: A Treatise on Economic Principles*, 2nd ed. (Auburn, Alabama: Mises Institute, [1962] 2009), ch. 7:3–5.

5. Gary North: *Ethics and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on the Epistles* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), ch. 23.

ple place a high value on the present and a low value on the future. "How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man" (Prov. 6:9–11). He who wishes to hire a slothful person must offer above-market wages. This reduces the quantity demanded.

41

MONEY: THE MOST MARKETABLE COMMODITY

A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh merry: but money answereth all things.

ECCLESIASTES 10:19

The Preacher announces what is obvious. A person who wants an opportunity for laughter should attend a feast. There, laughter is expected. It is part of the celebration. At a feast, wine is consumed. This increases the likelihood of laughter. People are less inhibited, more merry.

Why did he announce this? What was his point? To make a contrast between feasting and drinking on the one hand and money on the other. But what is the nature of this contrast? What is it about feasting and drinking that sets them apart from money?

Specialization. If a person wants laughter, he pays for a feast. If he wants to be merry, he pays for wine. *A specific desire is fulfilled by a specific asset.* The Hebrew word translated "feast" is the word for "bread." The uses of bread are varied, but they are not universal. The same is true of wine. If you want laughter, the price is the consumption of food. If you want to make merry, the price is the consumption of wine. Food is the means to an end: laughter. Wine is a means to an end: merriment.

A. The Universal Means to Multiple Ends

In contrast is money. Money is a means to multiple ends. The Preacher uses poetic language: "money answers all things." A specific goal figuratively cries out for specific means. As a means to laughter, bread cries out: "Use me." As a means to merriment, wine cries out: "Use

me." As a means to all things, money cries out: "Use me."

The Preacher recognizes the universality of money. There is no money that does not offer near-universality. That is money's claim to fame. Money is widely recognized as a means of exchange. It can be used in many situations as a means to achieve one's goals. It can be used to pay for a feast or pay for wine. Caterers of feasts are happy—even insistent—to be paid in money. So are sellers of wine. Wherever we turn, there are sellers who are ready to hand over ownership of whatever it is that they sell in exchange for money.

Economists identify money as possessing these characteristics: (1) recognizability, (2) divisibility, (3) durability, (4) portability, and (5) high value per unit of weight. Some economists identify money as a means of exchange. Others identify it as a store of value. Others identify it as a unit of account. Ludwig von Mises identified it as the most marketable commodity.[1] He said that the other characteristic functions of money are secondary.[2]

Money is desired because people see that it has been highly desired in the past. They extrapolate this into the future. They see money as possessing market value in the future. This is the store-of-value function. It is more accurate to say that money is a valuable thing to store. There is nothing of intrinsic value to money, or anything else. All economic value is imputed subjectively. If this were not true, then the money would not have failed in the second year of the famine in Egypt (Gen. 47:15–16).[3] It would not have failed in Jerusalem during the famine in Elisha's day (II Kings 6:25).

B. Autonomous Man and Money

The Preacher generalizes: "money answereth all things." But is this really true? No. There are many things that money cannot buy. One of these is the supernatural power to perform miracles on behalf of God. Simon the magician tried to buy this.

> But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God. And to him

1. Ludwig von Mises, *The Theory of Money and Credit* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, [1912] 1953), pp. 32–33.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 34–37.

3. Gary North, *Sovereignty and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Genesis* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1982] 2012), ch. 34.

> they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries. But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women (Acts 8:9–12).
>
> And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money, Saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost. But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee (Acts 8:18–22).[4]

Money makes possible the modern division of labor. Without money, the division of labor would be that of a barter society: primitive. Money buys whatever is offered for sale by money. Yet most aspects of man's social life are not based on the exchange of money. Most services inside the family are not purchased by money. The same is true of churches, fraternal groups, and other voluntary associations. Money does not answer all things. It is used in the area of market exchange. To say that money answers all things is to deify the market. Clearly, the Preacher speaks here as representing autonomous man.

Conclusion

The Preacher offers a view of man that is misleading. He says that money answers all things. It does not answer the most important things: confession of faith, marriage, honor, voluntary sacrifice, integrity, and most other human relationships. His statement is a classic case of reductionism: reducing man and reducing society to self-interest and market exchange.

Money is the most marketable commodity. It is the basis of the modern division of labor. It makes possible modern mass production. It is far more important today than it was in the Preacher's day. Yet he made this statement. He knew it was not true. But autonomous man acts as though he believes it is true. We can see this in folk wisdom. "Every man has his price." "If he is so smart, why isn't he rich?"

4. Gary North, *Sacrifice and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Acts*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 6.

42

CHARITY PAYS DIVIDENDS

Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.

ECCLESIASTES 11:1–2

A. A Positive Rate of Return

The Preacher speaks as a covenant-keeper here. He says that there is a positive rate of return (ROI) on charitable giving. There is therefore a system of ethical cause and effect in history. This is not what he has said previously in his role as autonomous man.

What does it mean to cast bread upon waters? This is not a familiar phrase. Some expositors have thought it refers to casting seeds into lakes or rivers. John Gill, the eighteenth-century Baptist who commented on every verse in the Bible and who had a mastery of the Talmudic literature, invoked images of tears. This exegesis is stretching the phrase out of shape.

> . . . a man casts seed into the earth; but here it is said to be "upon the waters"; bread is to be given to such as are in distress and affliction, that have waters of a full cup wrung out unto them, whose faces are watered with tears, and foul with weeping, from whom nothing is to be expected again, who can make no returns; so that what is given thorn seems to be cast away and lost, like what is thrown into a river, or into the midst of the sea; . . .[1]

The idea of casting something onto a flowing river or into the sea does seem to relate to what the Preacher advises. Were it not for this

1. Gill had an almost pathological hatred of periods.

confirmation, a man who gives away food would have no way of knowing that his generosity will ever be repaid. What is not intuitive is said to be part of a system of causation. A man surrenders ownership over food, yet he can rest assured that he will find it again "after many days."

This text does not say that he will make a profit, only that the bread will be returned. In the next verse he explains that the world is uncertain. "Thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth." A man cannot know all of the dangers that may threaten him. He is in this sense flying blind. But the previous verse reassures the generous man that his gift will not be in vain. "Give a portion to seven, and also to eight." Open your hand wide, the Preacher advises. The threats are many. This calls for exceptional generosity.

B. Return on Investment

A standard measurement in business is return on investment (ROI). Money goes out. Even more money had better come back in. If it does not, then a profit-seeking enterprise is doomed. It will run out of funds.

The Preacher recommends that a man be generous because life's threats are uncertain. In the Preacher's day, there was no way for a man to estimate these threats. Today, there is: the law of large numbers. Certain kinds of events can be classified together. The probability of a particular type of event within this large class can be estimated mathematically. This is the basis of insurance. This discovery transformed medieval civilization in the West.[2] It led to modern society.

A man can insure against an evil event by participating in a community. Communities are marked by generosity. Membership provides access to aid from others. But the Preacher does not use this argument. He says that bread cast upon the waters does return. Men should therefore be highly generous.

It takes exceptional faith to act in terms of the Preacher's discussion of cause and effect. When someone surrenders ownership of an asset without receiving something in return, he is poorer. His net worth is less. Yet the Preacher says that he is not that much poorer. The bread will be returned.

This return would actually be a negative because of the phenomenon of interest: a discount of future goods against present goods.[3]

2. Peter Bernstein, *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk* (New York: Wiley, 1996).

3. Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1949), ch. 19.

If I will receive that which I surrender, I lose the use of the asset for a time. Present goods are more valuable than the same future goods. So, other things remaining equal, a return of my forfeited bread constitutes a loss. But other things do not remain equal. There are unknown evils out there. The uncovered pits of life are many, and it is dark outside. The Preacher says that generosity will be repaid. He does not say how.

C. Voluntarism

Generosity must be voluntary. Gill understood this.

> . . . it must be "thy" bread, a man's own; not independent of God who gives it him; but not another's, what he owes another, or has fraudulently obtained; but what he has got by his own labour, or he is through divine Providence in lawful possession of; hence alms in the Hebrew language is called "righteousness": and it must be such bread as is convenient and fit for a man himself, such as he himself and his family eat of, and this he must cast, it must be a man's own act, and a voluntary one; his bread must not be taken and forced from him; it must be given freely, . . .

This denies legitimacy to the welfare state and its theological foundation, the Social Gospel. Gill understood the principle, "thou shalt not steal." He knew that the commandment did not say, "thou shalt not steal, except by majority vote." The Preacher recommends charity, not special-interest legislation that uses state coercion to transfer wealth from one voting bloc to another.

Conclusion

Charity pays dividends. It returns after many days. All is not lost. Furthermore, what you do to others in need will reduce your risk of unknown disasters. He does not say how. To assert such a system of causation implies a system of providence.

This is why I conclude that he is speaking as a covenant-keeper here.

43

INPUTS AND OUTPUT

If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth: and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be. He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap. As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all. In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.

ECCLESIASTES 11:3–6

A. If . . . Then

The Preacher begins with an observation. "If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth: and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be." This is an "if . . . then" explanation of causation. Men have no control over the *ifs* of nature. They therefore have no control over the *thens*.

A farmer who is a keen observer of nature makes decisions about his proper course of action. "He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap." Wind blows away the seed. Rain ruins harvested crops. He can control his labor. He can plant or not; he can reap or not. He has no control over nature. He must adjust to nature.

This explanation of causation ignores magic and prayer, both of which assume that the nature can be influenced by individual actions within a cosmos broader than nature. Magic relies on ritual manipulation within a cosmos governed by this principle: "As above, so below."

We can supposedly manipulate nature by manipulating representative physical objects. Sovereignty is not final. It is shared between man and a personal cosmos.

Prayer relies on a petition before the throne of God, who is sovereign over history. Moses' prayer invoked God's reputation in response to God's threat to destroy the Israelites and create a new nation for Moses.

> And Moses said unto the LORD, Then the Egyptians shall hear it, (for thou broughtest up this people in thy might from among them;) And they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land: for they have heard that thou LORD art among this people, that thou LORD art seen face to face, and that thy cloud standeth over them, and that thou goest before them, by daytime in a pillar of a cloud, and in a pillar of fire by night. Now if thou shalt kill all this people as one man, then the nations which have heard the fame of thee will speak, saying, Because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land which he sware unto them, therefore he hath slain them in the wilderness (Num. 14:13–16).

God answered this prayer.

Nature is under God. It operates predictably in general, but unpredictably in specifics. Weather forecasting is a good example. Men can predict the path of a tornado, but they cannot predict where one will form. With the advent of weather satellites, predictions have become far more accurate. But as to what causes patterns, there is great disagreement. As for controlling the weather, little can be done. We must adjust to nature.

B. Man's Ignorance

The Preacher asserts that man knows very little—nothing important—about the specifics of either nature or God. "As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all." This is not a denial that we know the patterns of both. Human pregnancies generally last nine months.

We work all day. We are not sure of the outcome. "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good." Yet there is a pattern over time. What are the actions recommended by the Preacher? The first is work. "In the morning sow thy seed."

What is the second recommendation? "Withhold not thine hand." The meaning of this phrase is obscure. It appears nowhere else in

the Bible. If it also refers to work, then it is work associated with the evening. This is not reaping, which is the contrast of the earlier verse: refusing to reap because of the rain clouds. Farmers do not reap when the sun is going down.

The phrase could refer to some other form of labor. Not withholding one's hand would then be the opposite of folding one's hands in sloth. "The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh" (Eccl. 4:5). A refusal to work produces poverty.[1] If this is the meaning, then the Preacher is recommending work from morning to evening. But no matter how hard one works or how long, the outcome is random.

I think it refers to charity. This is a carry-over from verse 2: "Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth." [2] Why give charity? Because of the ethical cause-and-effect system of the universe. Why should charity produce the same positive result as labor? In what kind of cosmos is charity an input, in the same way that labor is? Answer: a world governed by the God who is both sovereign and ethical.

The Preacher here insists that the daily outcome is unknown. "Thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good." Labor in the morning may produce a good outcome, or it may not. Charity in the evening may produce a good outcome, or it may not. Both may produce good. The outcome is unknown, in contrast to the inputs, which are known.

This reveals man's condition. We know what outcomes will cost: the cost of inputs. We make plans in terms of these costs. We forfeit leisure and consumption to fund these plans. Yet we cannot be sure that at the end of the day, we will be ahead of schedule or behind. The specifics are elusive in the morning. But we can still have legitimate confidence in the outcome of the overall plan.

In the free market, most innovations fail. This is not the same as saying that most plans fail. Most of life is in maintenance mode. Most plans are successful. By sticking to tried and true practices, men achieve success. They must also innovate in order to continue to succeed or succeed at a rate above average. A standard recommendation based on Pareto's law would be 80% maintenance and 20% innovation. This allows for a failure rate of innovations of 80%: 16% of everything.

1. Chapter 11.
2. Chapter 42.

The Preacher is saying something different: a failure rate in maintenance mode of 50%, i.e., random. This is a denial that men learn from history, selecting those production processes that produce a positive rate of return. Success in the past offers no guidance in the present. There is no historical continuity. There would not only be no progress, there would be capital consumption. This would lead to death. This is a counsel of despair.

C. Theonomy or Autonomy?

In whose name is the Preacher speaking: covenant-keeping man or autonomous man? In the view affirmed here, is causation biblical or humanistic? His conclusion: men should be hard working and charitable. This is consistent with the Bible. It is inconsistent with any system of cosmic causation that relies on the view of the cosmos as impersonal, whether random or deterministic.

Men do not possess omniscience. "Thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all." Men do not know all of the works of God, but they can know His law. "The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). This is why he concludes: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Eccl. 12:13–14).[3] This is theonomy.

The Preacher here is affirming the randomness of daily output, not randomness of final output. The producer must sacrifice leisure in the morning and assets in the evening, day after day. He must forfeit present income, which includes leisure. Why? Because, if he refuses, he will surely fail.

Conclusion

The Preacher affirms the randomness of daily economic cause and effect. A producer can add inputs to the production mix until the cows come home. The cows, if they even come home, may be either fat or lean. The inputs, including accurate knowledge of nature, do not determine the daily outcome. There is no predictable daily relationship between inputs and output. But there can be predictability of pat-

3. Chapter 45.

terns in nature. This is why men should pay attention to the weather if they farm. Similarly, there is predictability between obeying God's law and success.

> Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away (Psalm 1:1–4).[4]

4. Gary North, *Confidence and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Psalms* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), ch. 1.

44

THE VANITY OF DEATH

Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity.

ECCLESIASTES 12:5–8

A. The City's Cycle

The Preacher returns to the theme of cyclical history. He concludes much as he began: in despair over the cycles of life. He began with the cycles of nature (Eccl. 1:2–7).[1] He concludes here with the cycle of the city. Once, the city had been productive and optimistic. It had become wealthy. But the day of decline will arrive. The golden bowl will be broken. The pitcher and the wheel will be broken. He begins with this decline, but he ends with the most fundamental decline. Every man will die. "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it." What is the conclusion? "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity." He ends where he began. "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity" (Eccl. 1:2). This is appropriate. If you argue logically from a presupposition, you will arrive right where you began. But you will have better arguments. There is progress in argumentation.

The Preacher has surveyed the way the world works. He has done

1. Chapter 1.

so from two perspectives: the sovereignty of death and the sovereignty of God. He has devoted more space to the sovereignty of death.

At first, his commitment to cyclical history seemed to be an affirmation of life. "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9). There is no permanent progress. But there is also no permanent decline.

B. Beginning With Nature

The problem here is that he begins with nature. Nature was never to be autonomous. It was meant to be under man's authority, as the designated agent of God. To use nature as a model for man is to misunderstand both man and nature. God, through the dominion covenant, commanded Adam (Gen. 1:27–28)[2] and later Noah (Gen. 9:1–3)[3] to subdue the earth. Adam was to make a perfect world better: to dress it. This mandates progress. It therefore implies linear history, but not just linear history: progressive history. In personal matters, we call this progressive sanctification. This is not limited to individuals. It is to apply to nature and to civilization. The kingdom of God is the civilization of God.

Nature is under the curse of Adam (Gen. 3:17–19).[4] Adam is under the curse of death. So is nature. Had the redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ not delivered man from the second death (Rev. 20:14), nature would be doomed. Denying the redemption of Christ, modern science affirms the death of the universe. Because most scientists believe that the universe is a closed system, they see it as subject to the second law of thermodynamics. All energy is therefore moving from potential energy to kinetic energy, never to return again, never to work again, never to provide heat again. This final end is called the heat death of the universe.[5] Modern autonomous man is even more committed to the philosophy of autonomy than ancient man was. He is therefore more aware of *the linearity of nature: from life to death*. This is the progress of the philosophy of autonomy. It is more consistent. It is better informed scientifically.

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2. Gary North, *Sovereignty and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Genesis* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), ch. 4.

3. *Ibid*., ch. 18.

4. *Ibid*., ch. 12.

5. Gary North, *Is the World Running Down? Crisis in the Christian Worldview* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1988), ch. 2.

C. The Death of the City

The Preacher was aware of progress. Every society understands progress. Men want things to get better. They forego the present use of resources for the sake of income in the future. This is why people save. They make tools. They use their minds to solve new problems.

The ancients did not believe that progress can be sustained.[6] They saw the dust of death as covering the inheritance of every city. They had no long-term hope.

The Preacher uses the dying of the city to return to his theme of the sovereignty of death. Men die. Nature goes on as before, but everyone dies. Every city dies. Men come and go. Cities come and go. Nature stays the same. Nature is immune from death, but nothing that man builds is. The sovereignty of death extends its rule over man.

Modern physical science completes the investigation. It is not just cities that die; nature itself is dying. The process takes enormous quantities of time, but it is no less relentless, no less sovereign. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust: frozen dust. If anything will still move, it will be electrons. Electrons do not progress. They are not linear.

Conclusion

The Preacher offers no hope. How could he? The city of man dies. Men also die. What they build will not survive. Nothing of permanent value is transferred to the next generation. The stable cycles of life in nature are only background for the cycles of death for man and his works. Nature does not care that its cycles roll on meaninglessly. Man does care. Nature is without self-awareness. Man is not. Nature imputes nothing to itself. Man imputes vanity to himself.

The Preacher has reached the end of the road. In terms of his own philosophy of autonomy, this road is a circle. There is no end to it. He arrives just where he began: with vanity. If he is better informed, this is a paradox. There has been progress in his understanding of the futility of progress. He has written it all down, but to what end? No end. "And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh" (Eccl. 12:12).

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6. Stanley Jaki, *Science and Creation: From Eternal Cycles to an Oscillating Universe* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1974), ch. 6.

45

THE ANSWER IS THEONOMY

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

ECCLESIASTES 12:13–14

A. Transferring the Inheritance

The Preacher at long last returns to his father's deathbed instructions. As part of the covenantal transfer of the inheritance of kingship, David delivered to his son the same charge that Moses delivered to Joshua. "And he gave Joshua the son of Nun a charge, and said, Be strong and of a good courage: for thou shalt bring the children of Israel into the land which I sware unto them: and I will be with thee" (Deut. 31:23). It was the same charge that the elders of Israel delivered to Joshua.

> Be strong and of a good courage: for unto this people shalt thou divide for an inheritance the land, which I sware unto their fathers to give them. Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest. This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success. Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest (Josh. 1:6–9).[1]

1. Gary North, *Disobedience and Defeat: An Economic Commentary on the Historical Books* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), ch. 1.

Here is the account of this covenantal transfer of inheritance.

> Now the days of David drew nigh that he should die; and he charged Solomon his son, saying, I go the way of all the earth: be thou strong therefore, and shew thyself a man; And keep the charge of the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, that thou mayest prosper in all that thou doest, and whithersoever thou turnest thyself: That the LORD may continue his word which he spake concerning me, saying, If thy children take heed to their way, to walk before me in truth with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail thee (said he) a man on the throne of Israel (I Kings 2:1–4).

B. The Lesson Learned

The Preacher has devoted his book to a consideration of two worldviews: autonomous man and covenant man. Here, he reaches a conclusion: the resolution of this debate is a return to biblical law.

He does not explain the logic of this conclusion. Instead, he relies on what he has already presented. He has presented a case against autonomous man by showing the futility of life, according to the presuppositions of autonomous man. The Preacher says that he has personally lived the life of autonomous man, and he presents his conclusion: vanity, all is vanity.

The Preacher was probably Solomon. We know this because of the opening words, which identify the author as a son of David (1:1). It is unlikely that any other son of David experienced all that the Preacher experienced and then wrote it down. Having experienced all this, he returned to his father's original admonition.

We are told that Solomon was a wise king. "And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea shore. And Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt" (I Kings 4:29–30). Yet we are told by the Preacher that he tasted all that he describes in this book. He discovered firsthand that all roads to and from autonomy lead to vanity. A wise man should have known this from the beginning. Yet the Preacher was unwilling to abide by his father's admonition, which his father had learned by violating God's law repeatedly. David had multiple wives, in opposition to biblical law. The Mosaic law restricted the king of Israel in this regard. "Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away: neither shall he greatly multiply to himself

silver and gold" (Deut. 17:17). Solomon multiplied wives far beyond anything dreamed of by his father (I Kings 11:3). He also multiplied gold (I Kings 10:14–23). He lived the life he describes in this book. When it was over, he returned to his father's admonition a wiser man.

C. Covenant Man Is Theonomic Man

The Preacher's conclusion is straightforward. God will bring final judgment. Every secret thing will be examined in terms of God's law, "whether it be good, or whether it be evil." This is point four of the biblical covenant: sanctions.[2] Man therefore has a duty to obey God's laws: point three.[3] "Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." There is nothing complicated here.

This passage is one of the most powerful defenses of biblical law in the Bible. In two verses, the Preacher summarizes a lifetime of investigation—philosophical, ethical, and practical. These two verses affirm biblical law as the resolution of the debate between autonomous man and covenant man.

He does not invoke the law of nations. He does not mention natural law, which is supposedly in the possession of every rational person. He says that God's law is the key to a life well lived. What could be plainer?

It is too plain. Expositors generally prefer not to mention the context, which was the law of Moses. The long-winded Matthew Henry did include this brief comment in a long, rambling exposition of the verse.

> The rule of religion is the law of God revealed in the scriptures. Our fear towards God must be taught by his commandments (Isa 29:13), and those we must keep and carefully observe. Wherever the fear of God is uppermost in the heart, there will be a respect to all his commandments and care to keep them. In vain do we pretend to fear God if we do not make conscience of our duty to him.

When this is all that an expositor can derive from the Preacher's consummation of the most detailed philosophical book in the Bible, he is not deeply interested in getting to the heart of the matter, as defined by the Preacher. But, compared to his contemporary, Baptist John Gill, the semicolon's friend, Henry's comments are both precise and incisive. Gill wrote:

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2. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1987] 1992), ch. 4. Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory*, 5th ed. (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, 2010), ch. 4.

3. Sutton, ch. 3; North, ch. 3.

> **fear God, and keep his commandments**: "the fear of God" includes the whole of internal religion, or powerful godliness; all the graces of the Spirit, and the exercise of them; reverence of God, love to him, faith in him, and in his Son Jesus Christ; hope of eternal life from him; humility of soul, patience and submission to his will, with every other grace; so the Heathens call religion "metum Deorum" (q), the fear of God: and "keeping of the commandments", or obedience to the whole will of God, is the fruit, effect, and evidence of the former; and takes in all the commands of God, moral and positive, whether under the former or present dispensation; and an observance of them in faith, from a principle of love, and with a view to the glory of God;…

Writing a century later, Charles Bridges refused to admit even Gill's sliver of light regarding God's law.

> *The keeping of the commandments*—at least in the case of the disciples of the Lord—primarily regards the great commandment—"to believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ."[4] The gospel, therefore, is not obscurred, even when the terms of it are not completely given; so that—rightly understood, we fully identify the free grace and spiritual obedience of the gospel with the more legal exhortation to *fear God, and keep his commandments*.[5]

This is blindness, and it is self-conscious, because it is motivated by a hatred of biblical law. The Preacher was writing for Jews in the days of Israel's unified kingdom. The nation had covenanted with God at Sinai (Ex. 19).[6] The terms of that covenant are found in the Mosaic law: the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20)[7] and the Case laws (Ex. 21–23).[8] The Preacher was not looking forward to the disciples. He was looking backward to Sinai. He was reaffirming what the nation had known from the beginning. He was warning the nation not to abandon God's covenant law in a vain search for meaning and hope in autonomy. He was reaffirming theonomy as the antidote to the counsel of despair offered by autonomy. That Bridges could so completely twist the meaning of the consummation passage of the book indicates the extent to which evangelicalism at the highest levels has been cursed by antinomianism for centuries.

Hengstenberg refused to elaborate on the details of the law or the role of biblical law in the covenant. "To fear God and keep his com-

4. See I John 3:23.

5. Charles Bridges, *Ecclesiastes* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, [1860] 1961), p. 310.

6. Gary North, *Authority and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Exodus* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), Part 1, *Representation and Dominion*, ch. 20.

7. *Ibid.*, Part 2, *Decalogue and Dominion* (1986).

8. *Ibid.*, Part 3, *Tools of Dominion* (1990).

mandments is the duty of all men, because all bear His image, and can have no true life of growth except in connection with the primal source of their existence: they must also be punished with destruction if they criminally and violently break this connection."[9] What does "the primal source of their existence," meaning all men, have to do with the Preacher's call to obey the law of God? All men are under Adam's curse. It does not take a criminal and violent breaking of this connection—whatever this connection refers to—to bring people under God's judgment. Original sin does that all by itself.

Eaton's 1983 commentary recognized that the book is a debate between two worldviews. He did not label the first *autonomy*, possibly because he did not label the second *theonomy*.

> The body of the book has simply placed two alternative views of life over against each other and the life of faith has been commended. Now in the epilogue, almost as an aside, it is pointed out that such a life will have implications. It must not be restricted to the Mosaic law. It refers to all that is known to be God's will.[10]

Notice the sleight-of-hand operation here? "It must not be restricted to the Mosaic law." This shifts the reader's attention away from the Mosaic law. Yet what did Eaton think the Preacher was referring to, if not the Mosaic law? If the Preacher had something else in mind, he owed it to his readers to tell them what it was. These were Jews under covenant to God.

To escape the obvious—and it is obvious—Eaton broadened the context, as if broadening the context solves his exegetical problem. "The last phrase reads literally: 'For this is the whole of the man.' Elsewhere in Ecclesiastes, however, the 'whole of the man' is a Hebrew idiom for 'every man' (*cf.* 3:13; 5:19). The sense, therefore, is 'This applies to every man.'"[11] He did not consider the implication of what he had just written, namely, that the Mosaic law applies to all men. By broadening the context, he implied but refuses to say explicitly, that we can discard the Mosaic law, which is the context of the entire book. The Preacher had something else in mind. What, Eaton did not say. The Preacher also did not say. But it is obvious to Eaton that he must have had something else in mind. Otherwise, the

9. E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes, With Other Treatises* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1860), pp. 267–68.

10. Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), p. 156.

11. *Idem*.

Preacher was calling for a universal extension of theonomy—and that is clearly unacceptable.

Derek Kidner was the supreme master in this regard. He devoted not one word to explaining the phrase "the commandments."[12] He did not acknowledge their existence in his text. Here is the core of the book, its consummation, according to the Preacher, and Kidner had nothing to say.

H. C. Leupold, a Lutheran, did not identify those commandments which all men are supposed to keep. He ended by asking a rhetorical question, which I would ask of him and the other expositors. "How can anyone overlook so obvious a thing as this practical suggestion, seeing that it is the duty of all alike?"[13] My answer: an unwillingness to accept the Preacher's announcement that theonomy is the biblical alternative to autonomy.

The commentators have little or nothing to say about the covenantal context of the Preacher's definition of "the commandments," because they have rejected the continuing authority of the Mosaic law. They wax eloquent and sometimes quite long explaining the book, up to the final two verses, which the Preacher said explained the book. At that point, without warning, they say nothing judicially coherent, and they say it succinctly. This is not random. This is also not because the text is unclear. This is because the text is inescapably clear.

Conclusion

The Preacher built a case against covenant-breaking autonomous man. He marched the reader down a series of dead ends, each of which was marked by futility because of death. Then he pointed to the solution to his dilemma. That solution is the judgment of God. This judgment establishes the duty of man. Man's duty is two-fold: "Fear God, and keep his commandments." It is consistent with what Solomon wrote. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Prov. 1:7).[14] "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding" (Prov. 9:10). This is also consistent with what David wrote in defense of God's law in Psalm 119.

12. Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1976), p. 107.

13. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1952), p. 300.

14. Gary North, *Wisdom and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Proverbs* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2007] 2012), ch. 2.

CONCLUSION

The Book of Ecclesiastes is a puzzle for many readers—I suspect most readers. Some of it rings true to the God-fearing man, yet other parts—most of its parts—ring false. This is because most of it is false.

The reader is faced with a challenge: how to sort the wheat from the chaff. There is a lot of chaff. But it is brilliant chaff, chaff that registers in the hearts and minds of those who are approaching the end of their ropes. The Book of Ecclesiastes is the personal testimony of a man who had a great deal of rope and a lifetime to reach its end.

A. Autonomy vs. Theonomy

The book is best understood as a series of observations about the human condition. It is written from one viewpoint as a means of rejecting the other. But the author adopts a peculiar method to make his case. He presents most of his observations and conclusions in the name of the philosophy of life he opposes: human autonomy. He offers only token resistance until his final words. Then he publicly breaks with autonomy in the name of theonomy: the law of God.

The book presents a series of dead ends for autonomy. It blocks avenues of escape for autonomous man. Death is on every side, and death is absolutely sovereign. Autonomous man cannot legitimately have hope in the grave. He cannot have legitimate hope in his heirs. He will be forgotten. Vanity, all is vanity.

Why vanity? To make this judgment, a man needs a standard. What is the standard for autonomous man? Death. Death vetoes all hopes. Death consumes all productivity. Death ends all dreams. Death nullifies all fame. Death makes all of life vanity. That is because death is meaningless and without purpose. It makes life meaningless and without purpose. Vanity.

The book's conclusion is straightforward. For someone who wants

escape from the sovereignty of death, he should begin by fearing God, the final Judge. He does so by obeying God's law. Simple. But this simplicity is lost on expositors with a bias against biblical law. They do not want to affirm theonomy. They also do not want to affirm autonomy. So, they do what they can to avoid commenting.

The Preacher affirms the doctrine of God's law: theonomy. He recommends living in conformity to God's law. "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccl. 12:13). Why? "For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Eccl. 12:14).[1] God will judge all men in terms of His law. This is the Preacher's conclusion. It structures his arguments throughout the book. He is trying to box in his readers. He gives them an analogous choice to the one that Elijah gave the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

> And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word (I Kings 18:21).

B. Autonomy and Economics

The Preacher begins by affirming cyclical history.[2] This is an implicit rejection of the idea of progress. Human progress comes and goes, signifying nothing. If progress is an illusion, then striving for progress is a delusion. It is a huge waste of time, money, and effort. The Preacher repeatedly asserts that this is the case.

Accumulation takes effort, but it is futile. It is vanity.[3] Why is it vain? Because there is only a meaningless contest between cyclical purposeless nature and purposeless death. Death is universal. It does not discriminate. It judges nothing. It imputes nothing.[4] Life is all that is worth having, yet it must end.[5] Death swallows all. "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity" (Eccl. 12:7–8).[6]

The value of today's capital is dependent on the future value of this capital. That will be determined by others, who will impute value

1. Chapter 44.
2. Chapter 1.
3. Chapter 2.
4. Chapter 3.
5. Chapter 33.
6. Chapter 44.

to the surviving capital. Will they have good judgment or bad judgment? No one knows today. Their assessment of the value of capital will in turn be dependent on their assessment of the imputations of their heirs. *There is no final value because there is no final judgment.*

Who will inherit? A fool or a wise person? The accumulator does not know. This undermines his work.[7] To sacrifice consumption in the present for wealth beyond mere consumption in the future is vanity. Consumption is a good thing, but accumulating treasure is not. What will happen to treasure? It will be inherited. By whom? No one can be sure. This is sure: it will do the accumulator no good.[8] Even his own son may turn out to be as a stranger.[9]

Oppression is universal. "So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter" (Eccl. 4:1). A man cannot trust the legal system. There is no predictability based on righteous laws.[10] The practice of oppression corrupts the judges. It drives them mad.[11]

He who is successful will be envied. This is vanity.[12]

Autonomous man can be trapped by the lust to accumulate wealth. It is an addiction. He is never satisfied. He may be productive, but his productivity does him no good.[13] No one knows whether riches are worth anything or not. This is vanity.[14]

Conclusion: sorrow is better than laugher. Sorrow testifies to the ultimate sorrow: death.[15]

This outlook undermines autonomous man's commitment. He sees no ethical cause and effect in history. It is easier to pursue ethics moderately. The middle of the road is safest. It is also easier.[16]

Autonomous man despairs over his lack of knowledge. He does not have enough insight to understand timing.[17] He thinks it all depends on him. He is wrong. Nothing depends on him. It all depends on God. The covenant-keeper understands this. It gives him confi-

7. Chapter 4.
8. Chapter 13.
9. Chapter 21.
10. Chapter 9.
11. Chapter 24.
12. Chapter 10.
13. Chapter 19.
14. Chapter 22.
15. Chapter 23.
16. Chapter 27.
17. Chapter 29.

dence. He can rely on ethics rather than foreknowledge. Autonomous man is obsessed with his lack of knowledge.[18]

Whatever death does not dominate, chance does. There is no predictability of outcomes.[19] Wisdom counts for nothing. Money counts. A wise poor man will be forgotten.[20]

Rulers are not predictable. Some of them have terrible judgment.[21] The world is one gigantic booby trap. Every project has its deadly pitfalls.[22] The curse overwhelms the blessing. This outlook leads to paralysis.

C. Theonomy and Economics

Our world is governed by God, and God is supremely ethical. He has laid down the law to men. Men should obey it.[23]

Because God has laid down His law, He judges in terms of this law. He judges in history. He rewards those who obey His law. He penalizes those who disobey. "For God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God" (Eccl. 2:26a).[24] Consumption is a gift from God.[25]

There is purpose in history because everything that happens happens on time. Time is purposeful.[26] It has meaning. This meaning is imputed by the God whose decree governs time. This gives meaning to a man's work. It provides confidence regarding his efforts, despite his ignorance of the future. "Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him" (Eccl. 3:22)? There is legitimate joy in consuming.[27]

There is economic cause and effect in history. The slothful man will live in poverty.[28] But anxiety over obtaining wealth is a mistake. People should be content with basic necessities accompanied by peace and quiet in preference to wealth with anxiety.[29]

18. Chapter 32.
19. Chapter 35.
20. Chapter 36.
21. Chapter 37.
22. Chapter 38.
23. Chapter 45.
24. Chapter 6.
25. Chapter 20.
26. Chapter 7.
27. Chapter 8.
28. Chapter 11.
29. Chapter 12.

The division of labor is a great benefit to mankind. It makes our work more productive. The covenant-breaker sees this. This insight began Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776). But the phenomenon of the division of labor is grounded in the Trinity.[30]

Wisdom is a benefit. Successful kings rule in terms of it. A man of low birth and even prison can become a king, if his wisdom is sufficient.[31] Wisdom is not vanity. Wisdom with an inheritance is even better.[32]

God is the enforcer. He enforces vows.[33] He sees the evil that men do, and rules over human courts.[34] We do not live in a world governed by either cycles or death. Nature is purposeful.[35] It therefore is not cyclical.

God-fearing people can have faith in progress. The end is better than the beginning. Patience is the proper attitude.[36]

God has made man upright. The result is inventions of all kinds.[37] This is an important aspect of progress and economic growth.

There is ethical causation in this world. The normal pattern is blessings for the man who obeys God's law and cursings for the man who doesn't. Thus, when a good man receives his reward, he can enjoy it. He can eat, drink, and be merry.[38]

This being the case, theonomic man should apply himself to his work with great devotion and energy. Anything worth doing is worth doing well.[39]

The labor of the fool is wasted. He does not know how to market.[40] This gives the wise man an advantage. The slothful person is also a weak competitor. He lets things drift.[41]

Charity pays dividends.[42] This indicates that this world is governed by ethics. It is not totally random. A wise man pays attention to the signs.[43]

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30. Chapter 14.
31. Chapter 15.
32. Chapter 26.
33. Chapter 16.
34. Chapter 17.
35. Chapter 18.
36. Chapter 25.
37. Chapter 28.
38. Chapter 31.
39. Chapter 34.
40. Chapter 39.
41. Chapter 40.
42. Chapter 42.
43. Chapter 43.

Conclusion

When autonomous covenant-breakers live consistently with their own presuppositions about the nature of God, man, law, sanctions, and time, they cannot compete effectively with covenant-keepers who live consistently with their presuppositions about the nature of God, man, law, sanctions, and time. This has to do with sanctions in history, which produce covenantal victory.

> But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace (Psalm 37:11).
>
> Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5).[44]

The Book of Ecclesiastes offers rival views of the world and rival motivations. Autonomous man is on the defensive in a world that he perceives as meaningless because it is cyclical in the aggregate and fatal individually. Covenant-keeping man lives in a world governed by God, who judges in terms of His law. The world is coherent because God is coherent. History is linear because God brings His kingdom to victory. The first outlook, when followed, leads to economic stagnation. The second view, when followed, leads to compound economic growth.

44. Gary North, *Priorities and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Matthew*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 4.